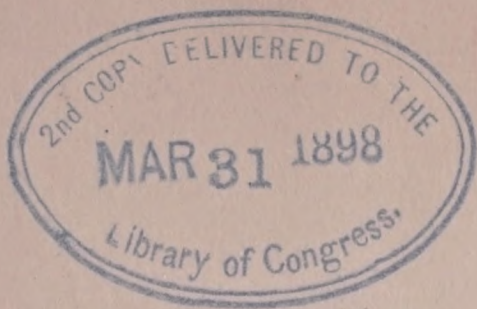




THE FREEDOM
OF HENRY
MEREDYTH



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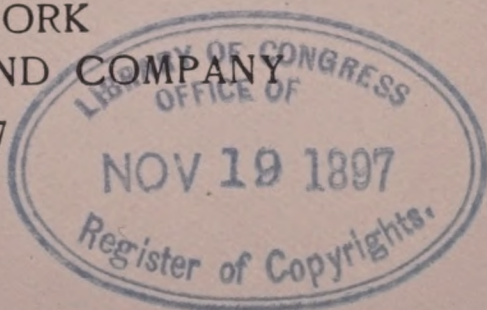
M. HAMILTON

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THE FREEDOM OF HENRY MEREDYTH.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

WHEN Henry Meredyth gained his divorce suit against his wife, with costs against Major Arkwright-Gage, the co-respondent, there was a certain amount of excitement among his friends. He had gone to Norway immediately after the scandal, and had consequently, in the rush of the season, faded a little out of people's minds, but he now found himself revived.

There had been no points of special interest about the case; the rumours that a disgraceful countercharge was to be made by the opposite side had proved to be only rumours, arousing undue expectations of excitement. On the contrary, there had been no defence.

Nevertheless, when Mrs. Fraser-Latimer and Lady Grace Bruce went out to a drawing-room tea after leaving the court, they found themselves centres of interest, before which the charms of various befeathered *débütantes* faded into insignificance.

Lady Grace and Mrs. Fraser-Latimer had considered

it their duty to be present at the trial as friends of the injured husband, but they proved disappointingly devoid of fresh particulars of any kind.

"So Pat Meredyth is a free man again," said Lady Dawley, a pretty young woman, who was in charge of one of the drawing-room *débutantes*.

"With something like the traditional twopence-halfpenny in his pocket," said Lady Grace Bruce.

"Is everything hers?"

"Every penny. Pat Meredyth was broke before he was two-and-twenty, and then they married him off to this heiress, and they tied up her money pretty successfully first."

The man who gave this piece of information was married to a Meredyth cousin, and therefore an authority.

"Poor fellow!" said Mrs. Fraser-Latimer, who generally got the box seat in Meredyth's coach, and was really sorry; "what will become of him?"

"Oh, he'll go to the devil as imperturbably as he has been accustomed to go everywhere else," said another man. "Pat Meredyth won't cry out when he's hurt."

"Wasn't he worth seeing in court?" said Lady Grace; "dressed and perfumed to the highest pitch of perfection, answering questions in his slow, dreamy way, with his air of not letting himself be perturbed by such a trifle as a divorce."

"I shouldn't be surprised if he turned up at your show this evening, Lady Dawley," said somebody else,

“braving it out, you know. It would be rather like him.”

“He’s not half a bad fellow,” a man said; “pity he’s such a fool!”

“He never cared for his wife,” said Mrs. Fraser-Latimer; “he’s a good friend of mine, but I must say he neglected her shamefully.”

There was a half-concealed sensation of amusement at her words. If Henry Meredyth had neglected his wife, Mrs. Fraser-Latimer was supposed to have had a good deal to say to it.

But Mrs. Latimer was a model of virtue as to words, by which means she gained for herself a certain latitude as to actions.

When Meredyth’s wife was discussed, she spoke of her after a fashion of severe virtue.

She had known what would come, she said; she had feared it. Evelyn Meredyth had always been so ill-regulated and excitable. She would find her punishment in Major Arkwright-Gage.

“But she was very fond of her children,” said Lady Dawley.

“In her way, yes. Heaven help them now!”

“Why, surely you don’t think Pat will ill-treat them?”

“Ill-treat them!” Mrs. Fraser-Latimer said with a laugh. “Oh, certainly not. Only indulge them with a little wholesome neglect. I suppose their mother will provide for them; otherwise they will have to starve.”

“Won’t his brother, Lord Meredyth, do something? Won’t Pat’s eldest boy come in for the title?”

“I suppose he will. But Lord Meredyth and Pat never hit it off.”

“The only thing,” said Mrs. Latimer with decision, “is for Pat to marry again, and to marry money. He was born to be a bachelor, and it’s a pity, but it’s absolutely necessary.”

“And it’s a question,” said Lady Grace, “if the four children won’t weight the scale rather heavily against his somewhat elderly charms.”

The Meredyth cousin murmured a regretful aside, reminiscent of Mr. Fraser-Latimer’s unfortunate existence.

“If Pat can make up his mind to the accent,” said Mrs. Latimer, “an American would marry an idiot centenarian, with children as the sands of the sea, if he were next heir to an earldom.”

“I think I have heard,” said the Meredyth cousin, “of English girls——”

“At any rate,” Mrs. Latimer interrupted, “an heir-ess must be found—and I will find her. But I am afraid it must be an American.”

Everybody agreed that she was exceedingly kind. One or two, notably the Meredyth cousin, doubted, in an aside, if her help and patronage would conduce to a happy marriage.

But Mrs. Fraser-Latimer knew better than to hear an aside.

CHAPTER II.

HENRY MEREDYTH, when he came out of court, called a hansom, and had an imperceptible moment's hesitation as to where he should tell the driver to go.

Meredyth was a tall, fair, handsome man, with pale blue eyes and rather a weak chin. He wore his hair divided in the middle, and carefully disposed to hide a slight increasing baldness, which caused him acute concern. Upon his appearance and his clothes he bestowed much consideration, finding a distinct pleasure in being known as the most invariably suitably dressed man in town. Even upon the present occasion, which had not afforded much opportunity for delicacies and shades in attire, there was something in the arrangement of his tie and the absence of his usual buttonhole which proved that he had not failed to give the matter due consideration.

When he found himself alone in the hansom, he was careful not to relax the manner of indifference and abstraction with which he had faced the court.

He lounged back in his seat, stroking his duly waxed mustache thoughtfully; a little later it occurred to him

to roll and light a cigarette, and he had time to smoke it half through before the hansom stopped at his own door.

There was no reason or temptation to hurry. Meredyth went slowly up the steps, and waited for a moment before he threw away his cigarette, and felt instinctively but uselessly for his latchkey.

He had not been at home since the crash.

He resentfully imagined a certain curiosity in the face of the footman who opened the door, and gave him a curt nod with a determined want of expression of any kind in his face. Oddly the sense of being observed weighed upon him more than it had done when he had fronted the sea of faces in the court-house; to escape, he turned into the breakfast-room as the nearest door, and told the man sharply to take a whisky and soda to the smoking-room.

A moment later the desolate feeling of a room that has been unused for some time struck upon him. It was very cold, and there was no fire; the blinds were down, and he went over and drew them up hastily. He found himself facing a great blank space on the wall with a faint sense of surprise, till he remembered that a large painting of Evelyn had hung there. She had sat for it to Millais soon after their marriage, and later had been immensely gratified to have her portrait hung on the line at the Academy.

Meredyth found himself resenting the officiousness of its removal.

The room was unbearable with that blank wall

staring at him, and the absence of all the little touches which Evelyn had understood so well.

He went to the smoking-room, where a newly born fire was sending up cold little jets of flame and smoke. He mixed himself an unusually stiff tumbler of whisky and soda, and threw himself into a chair.

It was all so uncomfortable and disagreeable, and it was an unreasonable dispensation of Providence to send him discomfort and unpleasantness. Meredyth had been accustomed to put aside all disagreeable things for nearly forty years, and he felt himself ill-used.

He had got along very comfortably, had never gone out of his way to do harm to any one, and had, in fact, many times done much kindness.

It was curious that he became all at once aware that he missed his wife—the woman who had been his wife till an hour ago—his wife who had been so little to him. He would have liked to have her with him now, and to say some politely, bitterly crushing thing to her.

How little they had known of each other in the eighteen years of their marriage! How little, Meredyth thought, she had ever tried to understand him or make him happy!

It occurred to him to wonder vaguely about the children. They had been so little in evidence, so entirely apart from his life, that he had really scarcely thought about the matter as it affected them before. Meredyth was accustomed, quite simply and unconsciously, to consider everything as it affected himself.

But they formed an undoubted complication, and

gave rise to all kinds of unpleasant misgivings. True to his principle of never allowing himself to worry, he got up and hunted out something to read. He did not very often take up a book; like most thoroughly idle men, he considered that he had no time.

It was popularly supposed that if he knew how to read, it was about as much as he did know; but, like many popular beliefs, this was a very great mistake.

A little later he went up to get ready for dinner, and dressed himself, to the camellia in his buttonhole, with as much characteristic care as if he had not expected to spend the evening alone.

On his way to the dining-room he met with a surprise. He found himself face to face with a girl—a girl also dressed for the evening, who stood and returned his look, out of light blue eyes like his own, only with a life in them which his own lacked. She had pretty, soft, fair hair, just the colour of his, and a latent obstinacy about her lips which was also one of his characteristics.

She stood opposite him with a flushed face, and a certain defiance in her whole manner.

“Vivien!” Meredyth said in surprise.

He had last seen this daughter of his a few months ago, with her hair down her back and dresses to her ankles, and to find himself faced by a young woman gave him a shock.

“How do you do?” said Vivien politely. “I thought it would be better for me to come down to dinner.”

Meredyth was incapable of protesting, but he found himself filled with consternation. He had considered himself to have only children to deal with. How old was Vivien?

When she had taken the head of the table in the most matter-of-course way in the world, and he was seated opposite to her, he studied her with a curious new interest. He felt a certain necessity for making conversation upon him. He was not aware that he and his eldest daughter had ever been alone together before, and certainly their conversation had always been limited to an exchange of greeting or a hope on his part that she was getting on well with her lessons.

Now he could think of nothing to say to this stranger.

"Where is Miss Mordaunt?" he said at last.

"She left last week," said Vivien shortly.

"Left last week!" said Meredyth, with a little hurry in his deliberate voice. "How do you mean she left? I heard nothing about it."

"You didn't engage her," said Vivien; "and, at any rate, I know she wrote to you in Norway. But we very seldom knew your address."

Meredyth moved uncomfortably on his chair, and helped himself to fish.

"And do you mean to say there is nobody to look after you all?" he said. "You'll have to go to school—you and Milly—that will be the best thing."

Vivien coloured hotly.

"No, indeed," she said; "you don't understand, father. I am not a child."

Meredyth was silenced. His lines had never lain among very young girls, and he entirely failed to understand any exaggeration in his daughter's manner. She appeared to know all about it, and certainly he did not understand. But he was entirely dismayed, and began to puzzle over Vivien's age again.

"How old are you?" he asked her at last.

"I shall be eighteen before very long," said Vivien; "you can't send me to school. Why, I know two girls who were *married* at eighteen!"

Meredyth studied her curiously. He was half inclined to ask her what she proposed that he should do with her if he did not send her to school. It was ridiculous, impossible, outrageous that he should be burdened with a daughter like this. His day was not over; he was a young man still, and if he had any ideas for the future at all they were connected with bachelor life at one of his clubs.

At the same time he was conscious of a curious interest in Vivien, more perhaps as a girl than as his own child.

What was she thinking and feeling? How much did she know or understand of what had happened to-day? He became seized with a fear that she would ask him for her mother.

What did she know? She must guess something; she must have *some* ideas of her own. She could not

be content to lose her mother out of her life without inquiry or curiosity.

If she asked questions, what was he to say?

In his fear of it he plunged into talk about Norway.

Vivien pretended to no interest. He became more and more conscious of the half-veiled hostility in her manner. She was a pretty girl, or rather she would be pretty when she got rid of certain youthful angularities. She had a very healthy appetite, and she was very much alive; every word and movement were full of energy, and reminded him of her mother.

He had considered Vivien as "one of the children," but now he began to realize uncomfortably that she had a very decided individuality of her own.

Misgivings about the others came to him. How old was Johnny? Must he expect a development equally astounding from him?

Meredyth felt himself a most unjustly hampered man, and pitied himself profoundly.

CHAPTER III.

“MEREDYTH *vs.* Meredyth and Arkwright-Gage.”

Meredyth had taken up the paper without thinking, as a kind of protection from the unfriendly eyes of his young daughter.

He had got half way through his breakfast, and made a few remarks which had received little response.

Now when he opened the paper his own name seemed to spring to his eyes. He crumpled it up impatiently. Could he not even have his breakfast in peace?

But he could not put Vivien out of sight.

He became aware that she was rather smartly dressed—somewhat too smartly for the hour and the occasion. It occurred to him as a distinctly unpleasant fact that he had not the least idea where the money to pay for dresses or anything else was to come from.

Vivien had obviously not wasted her space of freedom.

There was a pile of letters waiting for him in the smoking-room. Meredyth did not appreciate letters, and had not had them sent after him, nor had he been in any haste to open them the night before.

Now, to drive certain unpleasant feelings about

Vivien out of his head, he began to turn them over as he smoked.

He had a great idea of making himself comfortable. He drew a long, lounging chair up to the fire, and lighted his pipe and put up his feet before he began to look leisurely through his letters.

He had half expected to see his wife's handwriting, and gave a sigh of relief when he found that he was mistaken. There were a few invitations—a very few—among the earliest letters; there were notes from the people who considered themselves his most intimate friends, including two from Mrs. Fraser-Latimer. But the chief part of his correspondence consisted of bills of all kinds, dates, and amounts.

Obviously his circumstances were entirely public property.

Meredyth had never *felt* the want of money—his marriage had been just in time to save him from that—and at present his chief feeling was a ruffled annoyance at the impertinence of this deluge of bills.

He got up and threw his letters aside impatiently. There was no good bothering over them; all the bothering in the world would not provide him with money to pay them. It was the injustice of Fate and not any fault of his own which had brought him into this difficulty, and he was very much inclined to leave it to Fate to get him out again.

He had had quite enough of his own society, and it occurred to him to go down to the club, by way of finding somebody or something to distract his thoughts.

It was a very hot morning. Meredyth leaned back in the hansom, and tried to find shade for himself.

His idea was to lunch at his club, and he had vague thoughts of going to see Mrs. Fraser-Latimer later on. He was one of those men who need a woman, and he wanted to be pitied and sympathized with.

If he had carried out his half-formed programme, his life would probably have been very different. But an accidental meeting, to all appearance a very unimportant one, changed his plans.

Meredyth was an intensely self-conscious man. His slightest action or speech was always considered with a view to its effect on other people. As he got out of the hansom at the door of the club, he looked round with an instinct to see if any one was noticing him.

When he did so, his eyes met those of a tall, brown-haired woman, who was sheltered by a coloured sunshade, but seemed otherwise entirely indifferent to the heat as she walked along with a quick, businesslike step.

She was walking so quickly that if she had not seen Meredyth he, in his deliberation, would never have been able to stop her. But she did see him, and paused with a very pleasant smile.

He had known Alison Carnegie all her life; the Meredyths and Carnegies had married and intermarried for many generations, and she was, in fact, a kind of cousin of his.

There had been at one time a youthful engagement

between them, which had been very properly quashed by the authorities in both families.

Meredyth had always kept up a kindly feeling for her, though for many years they had seen very little of each other.

Meredyth, who hunted twice a week, went immensely into society, and spent all his odd time at his club, had not a moment left to cultivate any one whose way was not his, and Alison Carnegie, in her exceedingly different line, was a very busy woman.

But just now there was nobody he would have welcomed more gladly, and he greeted her with his most charming manner—Meredyth could be very charming when he chose.

“Alison,” he said, “I am very glad to see you. Where are you going to?”

“To lunch. I am glad we have met, Henry; I was going to write to you.”

“Come and have lunch with me. Please do.”

Miss Carnegie shook her head.

“I should hardly have time. My lunch is a very brief affair.”

“I’ll take you to St. James’s,” said Meredyth, “and you needn’t stay a moment longer than you like.”

He stood in front of her with languid obstinacy, stroking his mustache and waiting. Having made up his mind that he wished to talk to Alison, he was not to be easily set aside.

When he got his way, and found himself opposite

her at luncheon, he was satisfied, and leaned back in his chair with much contentment. Alison Carnegie was a restful sort of person to be with; people less impressible than Meredyth had found that out.

She was not an absolutely handsome woman, but she had been much admired nevertheless, and though she was many years over thirty now, and it pleased her to talk of herself as no longer young, it seldom occurred to any one else so to think of her. She had struck out a line of her own in life, and to all appearance found it a satisfying one.

"Busy as ever?" said Meredyth. His instinctive inclination to make himself agreeable always made him anxious not to neglect the fads of other people.

But Alison Carnegie did not care to talk to him of her interests.

She turned his question off slightly, and there was a sort of pause between them. Both of them knew that Meredyth wanted to talk of his troubles, and that he was impatient for sympathy. On the whole, he was glad of their chance meeting, and felt that Alison would be a safer and more satisfactory confidante than Mrs. Fraser-Latimer. But he had an unexpected difficulty in opening the subject, and he did it at last with exaggerated carelessness.

"Aren't you going to condole with me—or congratulate me?" he said.

Alison let his remark pass. She did not consider that it needed an answer, and she was satisfied now that he had been the first to speak.

"I wanted to ask you," she said, "can I help you with the children?"

Meredyth sighed. What a dependable kind of person Alison was, and how he would have liked to shift the responsibility of the children to her shoulders! He did not think this definitely, but it was what the sigh meant.

"Children, indeed!" he said; "let me tell you about Vivien. I come home to find her in long dresses, mistress of the house, and, I've no doubt, with her head full of balls and Ascot and Henley. Heartless little wretch!"

"Poor child!" Alison said.

"Poor child, indeed! I don't think she needs much pity. Most girls, I should think, if they had lost—any kind of a mother—would have felt it, and have asked at least—or—— But I believe Vivien is rather pleased than otherwise at getting a chance of wearing long dresses and sitting at the head of the table. She never said a word or asked a question."

Alison looked at him.

"If I believed that, Henry," she said, "I should think there was still more reason to say 'Poor child!' But do you, after all these years, venture to set yourself up as capable of understanding a woman—above all, a child-woman?"

"Well," said Meredyth, "it comes to this: Will you help me?"

"Of course," said Alison, "if I can. Vivien is the

difficulty, I can see, poor little soul! Milly is so young, and the boys——”

“There are none of them too young to starve,” said Meredyth with a laugh.

“I didn’t like to speak about that till you said something,” said Alison. She was absently crumbling her bread, and bestowing more attention upon what she was saying than upon her luncheon. She knew that it was not difficult to offend Meredyth, and that she might easily do more harm than good.

“Jack will surely do something for Johnny,” she said, “and—and, Evelyn, it will be quite right for her to help with the children——”

Meredyth coloured hotly.

“And perhaps somebody charitable can be found to support me,” he said bitterly. “No, I would rather send the children to the workhouse than beg like that, and go and drown myself—best thing I can do!”

His manner and feelings were so entirely removed from the despairing words of his speech that Alison found herself smiling in spite of all she could do, and the fact that she felt by no means gay.

“What I was coming to,” she said, “was, have you any plans? Have you any ideas about getting something to do?”

“Do? What can I do?” said Meredyth. He certainly looked particularly devoid of energy as he lounged on his chair, bestowing the best part of his attention on his clothes and hair.

“The horses are all gone,” he said, “and I suppose

the next thing is to get rid of the house, and take a family room in one of your beloved slums. I dare say you can recommend one."

Miss Carnegie answered him a little sharply:

"Don't be so affected, Henry," she said.

"It is all very well to say that, but I don't see anything else before us, sooner or later. What can I do at my age and without any training? Handicapped, besides, with four children. I am capable either of driving a cab or of giving my name as a director of companies. But of nothing else."

Alison knew very well that there was no use in showing impatience.

"Well," she said, "I would rather drive a cab than sit down with my hands crossed."

Something in her tone prevented him from saying what he was inclined to say, that he was of a different opinion. A wish not to appear entirely ill in her eyes roused him into a greater energy of speech.

"But what *can* I do?" he said. "Even if I do get a cab to drive, I don't suppose I shall make more than a couple of pounds a week, and five of us can't live on that! Why, my club subscriptions, my clothes——"

Miss Carnegie interrupted him.

"Henry," she said, "I have never thought you a fool. Please don't do yourself the injustice of talking like that. Think it over. I must go now, as I shall be late as it is for an appointment at the office. Think it over, and come and talk to me about that and the children on Sunday afternoon, will you?"

She did not put into words her idea that she might be able to help him, or rather to put him into the way of helping himself. She had a fancy that he would not like the thought of help from a woman.

When he had her into a hansom, Meredyth did not go to see Mrs. Fraser-Latimer.

He was conscious of an unusual and uncomfortable sense of responsibility and uneasiness. With the influence of Alison Carnegie upon him, he had an idea that he must do something—make some effort.

He went home and made his bills into a neat bundle, and filed them, after which he felt better. He also wrote a letter to his lawyers, with a view to discovering his position and exactly how much he would have to live upon.

As the result of all these exertions, he found himself somewhat exhausted, and decided not to face another evening *tête-à-tête* with Vivien, but to dine at the club.

In the meantime he wandered about the house in search of amusement, and finally made his way to the library, and began to turn over book after book idly.

He scarcely noticed little Jocelyn, his youngest boy, who was sitting in the dusk, curled up in a big chair by the window.

Jocelyn was a pale, plain child of eight or nine. He had something wrong with his heart, and was never allowed to exert himself or to run and play with the others. Meredyth, who was always good-natured, had

consequently taken more notice of him than of the rest, but just then he did not feel inclined to talk to anybody.

He stood there, taking down first one book and then another, scarcely thinking what he was doing.

He had almost forgotten the child's existence, and was half startled by a very long and heartfelt sigh behind him.

He turned round, not abruptly—Meredyth never did anything abruptly—but with less deliberation than usual.

"Hullo, Jossy!" he said. "What's the matter?"

Jossy raised a very friendly little face.

"It's only that I'm bored," he said with a half drawl which Meredyth recognised as an unintentional caricature of his own manner. "It's very dull for us, isn't it?" Jossy ended confidentially.

"By Jove, it is!" said Meredyth, with an echo of his little son's sigh.

He sat down, and Jossy sat opposite to him, crossing his thin, little legs, and even stroking his soft lips with a comical similarity to his father's attitude.

"Are you very dull, too?" he said. "There's nothing to do, and not even anybody to take us out for a walk."

"Poor little chap!" said Meredyth. "Where are the others? Haven't you got Milly to play with?"

"Milly is always with the maids. She likes to hear them talking, and sometimes they will play with her; but it's only running-about games, so I can't. I am

not very fond of being with women; I like George better."

"Who is George?" said Meredyth.

Jossy looked at him reproachfully.

"Not to know George," he said, "when he opens the door to you every day! He is a most interesting man. I am sure you would like to hear him talk about America."

But in spite of George's charms, upon which he proceeded eagerly to dilate, it was obvious that Jossy found life rather a weary business just then.

Here was a child who undoubtedly missed his mother. Jossy had always been a very gay little fellow—gay even through his frequent illnesses—and this depression was quite new to him.

But he was very dull. Mrs. Meredyth had been a foolish mother, but she had loved all her children passionately, and most of all Jossy. He had been accustomed to be spoiled and considered and amused, and had grown into a certain imperiousness of manner which had made him unpopular with the other children and with the servants.

And all at once, in a day, in an hour, he had sunk from the position of the most important person in the house to that of a small, rather neglected being, dependent for careless kindness on the servants. It was all so puzzling; Jossy had only the vaguest of fancies about this sudden change in his life, but he accepted it with a child's resignation and sense of the inevitable.

Meredyth studied him with an uneasy sense of self-reproach.

"Wouldn't you like story-books to read, or—something?" he volunteered vaguely. "What do you generally do in the afternoon? Not sit here doing nothing?"

"It makes my head ache to read all day," said Jossy. "I used to play draughts every afternoon, but there's nobody to play with now. I got Milly to play once or twice, but she hates it."

"Let's have a game, then," said Meredyth carelessly. Jossy's face lighted up at once.

"Really?" he said. O father, would you *like* it? And can you play chess? I was learning, and I know *almost* all the moves."

"All right. Off with you and get the board," said Meredyth. He was slightly amused at himself, and Jossy's radiant joy pleased and flattered him.

"You are *sure*," the little boy said anxiously, "that you like to play? It is not only to please me?"

Meredyth had just suffered two ignominious defeats when Vivien came in hastily.

He was pleased with himself, and consequently with all the world; he looked up and spoke to her in his most pleasant tone.

"Viva, come and help me," he said. "I am quite incapable of coping with such an accomplished player as Jossy."

Vivien did not look at him or answer him at all; she spoke to Jossy instead in a sharp tone.

“What are you doing, child?” she said. “You mustn’t bother your father like this. Come up to the school-room, and I will find you something to read.”

Jossy protested shrilly.

“I am *not* bothering father.—Am I, father?—And I don’t want to go upstairs and read.”

Meredyth, too, made a faint protest, but Vivien was more than capable of controlling them both.

She swept off her little brother in an unreasonably indignant fashion, pausing at the door to give her father a look which made him feel absolutely uncomfortable.

When he found himself so suddenly alone before the deserted draught-board, he laughed a little.

“By Jove, what an extraordinary girl! She positively hates me,” he said to himself.

Then he went off to the club with a clear conscience.

CHAPTER IV.

ALISON CARNEGIE was having a pause for rest. She had just finished a belated article which had run into her Sunday afternoon, her head was aching unwontedly, and she was glad to find herself a comfortable armchair, with many cushions. Alison rested as thoroughly as she did everything else, and it was this capability that made her able to get through so much work.

Her room was one of half a dozen she had reserved for herself in connection with the home for women off the streets, which she had established, and which was now in full working order under two matrons.

Alison had her own hall door, her own stairway, and her rooms entirely separate.

There was a swing door through which she could visit her women or have them to visit her when she chose.

Her writing and literary work was got through as far as was possible in the morning, but she had no separate room for this. A very ordinary writing-table in the window was all she needed, and she was not a woman to whom it was any trouble to keep this in good order.

It came naturally to Alison to have a place for everything and everything in its place.

She had bestowed a good deal of thought upon her room, and chosen everything in it carefully herself. A good many people would have considered it strangely empty. Alison liked space, and she disliked odds and ends and knickknacks of all kinds. She often said that if she had been sufficiently bold to follow her own taste entirely she would have had simply three chairs, a table, a writing-desk, and a piano.

She had a few flowers, but not very many. She did not care to leave their arrangement to a servant, and she had no time to attend to many herself and to keep them always fresh. Dead or dying flowers she could not bear.

She lay back in her chair and closed her eyes, trying for the time to shut out thought and rest absolutely. She was a very young-looking woman; but for a few lines about her mouth and eyes, she sometimes looked quite like a young girl. She had a strong face, with purposeful brown eyes, and a manner which erred every year less on the side of being a trifle too determined and dictatorial.

Alison was quite aware that a desire to manage people entirely for their own good was a failing of hers. It had got her into trouble many a time and oft, but of late years it had never got beyond a desire. As a girl her face had only been strong; of late an increasing sweetness of expression had come into it.

She could not control her thoughts to-day quite so well as usual.

She was wondering if Henry Meredyth would come to see her.

It was doubtful, she thought. He had been worried and troubled when she had seen him last, and it had touched her that he had turned to her then. She did not know how accidental his confidence had been. But during the last day or two she had heard that he had taken up his way of living much as before, had gone to his clubs, to his usual entertainments, and had hung about Mrs. Fraser-Latimer and women of like calibre.

What a disappointment his life had been! He had been such a clever boy, and so full of dreams and plans! Alison had heard them all during the two years of their impossible, blissful engagement.

She did not realize even now how much her influence had had to do with all his ideas—how much the stronger of the two she had been.

And yet she knew Meredyth very well; she had faced disappointment in him after disappointment, all following that first disappointment, when he had shown his weakness of purpose by giving her up, yielding to pressure, without at first ceasing to care for her.

Meredyth had not known his own mind; he had veered about from point to point, and what Alison had felt and borne nobody knew.

She had had to stand aside and show nothing, realizing, young as she was, that with her he was throwing aside his chance of making something of his life.

There had never been any unkindly feeling between them. Alison had visited Evelyn Meredyth; she

had seen the husband and wife drifting apart, and had seen just enough to realize that more than half the fault was his.

Evelyn was an excitable, passionate woman, and she had been at first very much in love with her husband, while he had always been careless and neglectful.

They had had the worst effect upon each other, and every year Meredyth's life had grown more purposeless, more entirely given up to making the time pass.

Lord Meredyth, Henry's elder brother, who was as busy in his own way as Alison was in hers, looked upon him with a sort of contemptuous wonder, and rejoiced that Johnny, to whom the title and property would probably go, showed symptoms of a disposition more energetic than his father's.

Only Alison still hoped better things for the man who had once been her lover, with a great, tolerant pity, which had extended itself to all men and women. It was her patience with Meredyth that had taught her to have patience through all that was tiresome and disappointing in her work—patience when men, over whom she had expended endless trouble, disappointingly relapsed, and girls, who had implored her to find them escape from their poverty, declined at the last moment the situations she had secured for them; when whole families would not and could not be roused to make the smallest effort to better themselves; when promises were made and broken a hundred times over, and she was inclined to say that it was hopeless to try

and help people who could never be depended upon to know their own minds.

Her roughly taught lesson of patience helped her through all this, and taught her to see from the point of view of the people she was trying to help.

She had never quite lost hope for Meredyth.

If this trouble that had come upon him failed to rouse him, then indeed nothing would.

About five o'clock he came in. Alison had had a solitary tea brought to her, with a few extra cups for emergencies, and she looked very comfortable and restful.

Meredyth met her eyes with a sense of satisfaction, and was glad he had come.

"I have come to be kindly treated," he said, "and, upon my word, I deserve it, for it is an absolute journey to get over here to the back of nowhere."

"It is within a quarter of an hour of the Strand," said Alison, "and is very convenient, even if no self-respecting person ought to live here. And we make excellent tea. Will you have some?"

Meredyth had come in with a whiff of scent about him, which extinguished the faint, dainty breath from a bowl of primroses in the window. He had a pink camellia in his buttonhole, and a pale pink tie.

"Of course I will have tea," he said. "Alice, I am at my wits' end. The servants are all disorganized; they have nothing to do, and consequently spend their time quarrelling. I am *not* domesticated. I never was made for a family man, and I am perfectly helpless."

Meredyth's languid voice had gained a note of depression, and Alison wondered if he had begun to feel the pinch of money.

"But you surely don't intend to keep all those servants?" she said.

"No, I suppose not," he assented, helping himself to cake. "I suppose I must dismiss some of them some day or other, but I don't know which, I am sure."

"Have you done anything about getting rid of the lease of your house?"

"Not yet," said Meredyth; "I suppose I shall have to."

Alison had a moment of silence.

"But, Henry," she said, "that is the first thing—the very first thing to do."

"I must see about it one of these days," said Meredyth. "The fact is, I haven't had a moment."

This manner of looking at things it was that drove Lord Meredyth beyond his patience at once, and made it quite impossible for the two brothers to find anything in common.

Henry Meredyth did not want to be told what he ought to do; he wanted to be soothed, petted, and sympathized with.

"What about the children?" said Alison.

He brightened a little.

"Jossy is a dear little chap," he said. "Johnny came home yesterday for his holidays, and seems to be a very ordinary, rough sort of schoolboy. But do you know one extraordinary thing? That boy never asked

for his mother, and you know how she used to adore him. He came in, just as if he noticed nothing different, as jolly as possible. And he never mentioned her name."

"Children are strange," Alison said; "probably Johnny knows more than you think. And what about Viva?"

Meredyth laughed a little.

"Vivien and I don't get on at all," he said. "That child hates me."

"May I go and see her?" Alison said. "I could go to-morrow afternoon, and I am in what is for me a whirl of gaiety next week. I could take her to several places, if I may?"

"Thank you," Meredyth said; "that's very good of you, Alice, if it won't bother you. Mrs. Fraser-Latimer asked me yesterday if I would let her look after her a bit."

Alison was quite conscious of a certain hesitation in his voice, and that he looked at her doubtfully.

"But, of course," she said, "that is out of the question."

"Of course," said Meredyth in an unassured voice; "at least, I suppose so. But one doesn't care to be rude. It was very good-natured of Mrs. Latimer."

It was most obvious that he was anxious to accept any help.

"I don't see that you need be rude," said Alison. "Don't you think you ought to be specially careful with Viva?"

"Yes—of course," said Meredyth slowly.

There was a mutual pause. Meredyth with great gravity, and an air of complete engrossment in what he was doing, was balancing his teaspoon on his finger. In reality, his thoughts were a long way off.

He broke the silence.

"I had a letter from Evelyn this morning," he said.

Alison was not very much surprised. She said nothing, but looked a question, leaving it to him to tell her as much as he chose.

"She offers," said he, "to do what I think right for the children—in the way of money. What should I say?"

"It is only charity to let her do something," said Alison, "if there was no other reason." She would not admit to herself the merest background misgiving that Henry might himself grow to be contented to sit down and do nothing on his wife's money.

"It was such a mad, hysterical, childish letter," Meredyth said, "I don't know how to answer it, or how exactly to be so brutal as to refer her to my solicitors."

His hand went half consciously to his waistcoat pocket, and Alison saw that if she wished, the letter was hers to read. But it seemed to her that this would be a cruelty.

"I know she means what she says," said Meredyth; "but the question is whether she will be able to carry it

out. Arkwright-Gage has spent all his own money, and I don't doubt he will spend hers. I know there is trouble ahead. Arkwright-Gage is a brute. I have seen him beat his horse about the head in the hunting field till the blood came pouring. And a man who is a brute to a horse is a brute to a woman too. He was fined for cruelty to his horses; he ought to have been flogged. But there will be nobody to interfere between him and Evelyn."

Alison sighed. "Poor Evelyn! She would never have been a happy woman."

"She was desperate for admiration," Meredyth said. "At one time she got plenty of it. She saw it slipping away from her, and as men receded she advanced, till she went too far."

Alison looked at him in a little surprise. She did not know that he had gauged his wife's character so entirely as she had done, nor that he could speak of her so dispassionately.

But it was a subject which there was no use in discussing. Evelyn had taken her life into her own hands. That she would want to see the children some day, and so complicate Meredyth's position, both he and Alison were silently sure. But Meredyth did not raise that difficulty now; he was not in the habit of looking ahead for trouble.

He leaned back his lazy length in his armchair, and said: "But the question is, supposing the children are all right, what is to become of me? What am I to do?"

"The question is," said Alison, "whether you really want me to suggest anything. Are you really in earnest about wanting something to do?"

Meredyth answered, drawing himself upright in his chair, and in a tone of prompt half offence.

"Of course I am in earnest. But what is it possible for a man to do, at my age, without any special training—unless I go as coachman or rough rider?"

"There's only one way in which I could be of a little use—in which I could help you a little," said Alison with some hesitation. "Do you remember," she said, "that at one time your idea was to write?"

She waited, colouring faintly. It was so long ago—such a lifetime—since she and Meredyth had tried to take up literature together. They had even begun a collaborated novel, which had never been finished. Somewhere, locked up in her room, Alison had the first six chapters of their nameless work.

She saw that he gradually remembered too. The episode was to him so entirely a forgotten and put-aside thing that it was a moment or two before it came to his mind.

She went on speaking, to cover the pause of recollection on his part.

"Of course, writing is a trade like any other, and would have to be learned. But I could get you a start"—she was a little unwilling to speak of her own help—"and you might like to try."

He shook his head.

"No use at all, Alison; many thanks. The time has

gone by for that. I can't begin now, and it's not in my line."

"But you would say that of anything I suggested. Why not try an article of, say, twelve hundred words? I will leave the subject to you. You might at least *try*. I know you have it in you."

"It's no good, Alison, thank you."

He looked hopeless. He lay back in his chair, with the obstinate look she knew in his face.

An interruption came while she was making up her mind that it would be useless to say any more.

A young and exceedingly high-church curate was ushered into the room in a great hurry. He began to speak before he was over the threshold, breaking into the peacefulness of the room, hot and even a little dishevelled.

"O Miss Carnegie! I've come about Sassoon's article," he began, and then he saw Meredyth and paused.

"Very well. Come in and have some tea," said Alison calmly.

"I have less than half a minute to stay; I have, really. I was due at the club ten minutes ago. And I have a hundred things to ask you about."

"Very well," said Alison again.—"You won't mind less than half a minute's business, Henry?"

The newcomer did not wait for further permission.

"I want to tell you Moriarty is in trouble again, and the police took him off yesterday. Can you go and see his wife to-morrow? I know you manage with the women, and don't get made a fool of, as I do."

"Wait a moment," said Alison, interrupting his breathless flow of words; "I'll note down what you want."

She got up and went over to her writing-desk with a glance of apology to Meredyth.

The curate followed her, still talking.

"And particularly," he said, "there's that girl in Bethnal Street; I don't know *what's* to be done about her——"

He lowered his voice a little, and Meredyth lost the end of the sentence. He had got up when Alison did, and now he walked over to the window, not to feel himself in the way.

But he could not help hearing what they were saying when the curate raised his voice again, this time having returned to his first subject.

"But about Sassoon's article. He wants to know if you can find room for it next week, because it is not a subject that will keep."

"I'll try. I promised him I would try. I suppose it is quite short? I'll write to him about it to-morrow, or he might come round and see me at the office."

"I am sure he will. But we shall be awfully hard at it to-morrow. We've our first boxing competition in the evening, and it remains to see how it will turn out. There's a certain possibility of it's ending in a free fight. Good-bye."

"Are you off to prepare for your musical evening?" said Alison. "I wrote to Mrs. Morse about that crip-

pled child. Isn't the father one of your performers to-night? You might tell him."

"I've my doubts if he'll turn up. He's rather a broken reed. Good-bye. By the way, Sassoon says he's going to write a novel."

Alison laughed. "I only hope he won't expect me to read it!" she said.

"I'll tell him you say so. It's to be Jewish, of course. He's going to leave Zangwill nowhere. Good-bye."

This time he was successful in getting himself away.

"What frightful energy!" said Meredyth. There was a certain briskness in his tone which made Alison look at him.

"Mr. O'Neil is a trifle too energetic," she said, "but he's an excellent boy."

"He seems to be very intimate here," said Meredyth with a shade of discontent in his tone. "Why, he spoke to your maid when she brought in the tea."

"Oh, of course he knows her," Alison said; "she is one of my women. In fact, it was he who brought her to me."

"One of your women?" said Meredyth. "You don't mean to say you let that class of women into your own rooms?"

"That girl was a servant in a lodging-house," said Alison. "One evening she happened to displease her mistress, and she was turned out into the street. She was a country girl, and had not been a month in Lon-

don. I grant you I should be very sorry to let her mistress into my rooms."

Meredyth shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

"You don't know," Alison went on, "all the good that young fellow and Abram Sassoon do in the slums."

"Abram Sassoon! Heavens, what a name!"

"He is a Jew, of course. He has much the most stuff in him of the two, though he is hardly fit to write a novel just yet. If self-confidence will carry him through, he'll succeed. He considers it his mission to look after the Jews, and get them back to Jerusalem."

"What absurdity!" said Meredyth.

"I don't know about that. And, at any rate, there are worse fads possible for a boy of twenty, with a million of money and nobody to control him. They are *good* boys."

"Well," said Meredyth suddenly, "I'll try that article, Alice. But you'll have to suggest a subject. Twelve hundred words. How many pages does that mean?"

If there was a smile in Alison's thoughts, there was no outward sign of it, and there was a certain sadness in her amusement.

How strongly Henry was influenced by his surroundings!

"Bryan O'Neil will do him more good than I can," she thought to herself.

CHAPTER V.

"VIVA, do you think Uncle Jack will take me to the theatre these holidays?"

No answer. Vivien was curled up comfortably, if inelegantly, on the broad school-room window seat, and very much engrossed in the book she was reading.

"*Viva!* I want to know if you think Uncle Jack will take me to the theatre these holidays?"

Johnny Meredyth had exhausted all his resources for amusement, and was sitting idly with his elbows sufficiently far on the table to shake Milly, who was painting, now and then.

He was bored and he was unhappy, and he had consequently been making himself a general nuisance. He had quarrelled with Milly and teased Jossy till both entertainments palled.

Vivien started when a little pellet of paper struck her sharply on the cheek. She looked up impatiently.

"You tiresome boy! How dare you be so rude?"

Johnny was obviously delighted to have roused her.

"If I'm rude," he said, "so are you. It is very rude not to answer a question."

"I didn't hear what you were talking about. The theatre? Oh, how do I know?"

Vivien returned to her book.

"There!" said Johnny; "you see she heard perfectly!"

Nobody answered. Milly, his faithful ally, had for once lost patience, and was not on speaking terms with him, and Jossy was disconsolately trying to play draughts by himself.

There was a silence.

Johnny yawned, leaned back in his chair, and began to kick the table. Milly was driven from her silence to remonstrate, which she did, firmly but not mildly.

Johnny, in response, gave the table an extra jerk, and upset her painting water all over her half-finished sketch.

She burst into a torrent of angry words, and appealed to Vivien, who administered a sharp, short scolding all round with great impartiality.

Johnny, who was really sorry, took great care not to show it, and proceeded to drum on the table and whistle with great diligence.

They were not normally quarrelsome children at all. They were all uncomfortable and unhappy, and felt themselves neglected, without realizing what was wrong with them.

The schoolroom maid came in just then with a message that Miss Carnegie was in the library, and wanted to see Miss Viva.

Vivien put down her book with a start and got up, her head still a little confused with what she was reading.

She told herself that she did not want to see Miss Carnegie. She had reasons of her own which made her a particularly unwelcome visitor.

She had been attracted by Mrs. Fraser-Latimer, who treated her as a woman, and whom she immensely admired.

Vivien was fiercely, aggressively grown-up just at present.

Jossy began to slip off his chair; he liked Miss Carnegie, and wanted to go and sit on her knee and coax her to play with him.

But Viva stopped him decidedly, and went downstairs by herself with a frown on her face and her stiffest manner. She had become intensely formal to counteract the fact of her youth.

Alison, who had cousinly privileges, and was to a certain extent free of the house, had gone to the library, because it was the room she liked best.

Meredyth had not forgotten his old love for books, though he had grown to take them superficially. He was always adding disconnected volumes, and in this Alison recognised a link between them—the books he chose were always what she herself would have chosen.

She had been looking through the shelves when Vivien came in. When Alison found herself in the room with books, she always drew to them by instinct; but she was only giving them a divided attention just then.

Alison was a born mother; she mothered her boys and girls in the slums; she mothered every little child

she came across. But she had a special feeling for Meredyth's children. They were "children stolen from her."

It may have been in part this special feeling that helped her to understand Vivien's attitude of aggressive dignity.

Certainly the girl's manner was not attractive. She was like her father, but she had none of his charming air of welcome which always fascinated for the time even people who disliked him. Instead, Vivien had very much the manner of repelling an unwarrantable intrusion.

"Well, Viva," said Alison cheerfully, "I have come to ask if you will dine with me on Wednesday, and go to Lady Fanshawe's At Home?"

Vivien was very much surprised. She was prepared to fight a denial of her claims to womanhood—possibly even a suggestion of school. She stammered and hesitated over her answer, feeling herself ungracious. She was not going to be bribed into friendliness, she said to herself; whatever Alison might say or do, she was on her guard. It would make no difference.

"Well, will you go?" said Alison. "I am not at all fond of going out by myself, and it might amuse you."

"Thank you," said Vivien unwillingly. She had never been at her best with Alison since she had grown from a child into a girl, but she had never been quite like this. Alison knew very well that it was a vague, reasonless jealousy on her mother's part which had pre-

vented Vivien from ever getting fond of her. Viva had always sided with her mother in an exaggerated way. But her manner had never before been so entirely antagonistic.

"I should like to go," she said, "but Mrs. Fraser-Latimer is going to ask me to dinner some day——"

"Not on Wednesday, I hope?"

Alison knew Mrs. Fraser-Latimer. She knew that however many pleasant things she might say, she was not very likely to ask a young girl like Vivien to dinner.

"Are you going anywhere this afternoon?" Alison said. "Johnny is at home, isn't he? How are you managing to amuse him? A boy is always hard to dispose of in town."

"He was out by himself all morning," Vivien said carelessly, "and he and Milly have been quarrelling all afternoon."

"That seems as if they were rather hard up for something to do," Alison suggested. "I wonder could I be of any use?"

Vivien thanked her, and shook her head. She was, in truth, in great need of help, but she would not have admitted it or accepted it from Alison for the world.

Miss Carnegie began to feel for Meredyth, remembering that he had told her he found it difficult to talk to Vivien.

She made another attempt, remembering that girls of Vivien's age always needed patience, and she only a little more than the rest.

There was nobody but Alison likely to have much patience with Viva.

"What do you do all day yourself?" she said. "Don't you find it dull? I suppose you read?"

"Yes," said Vivien, "I read a great deal."

"And what kind of books? I suppose you know all these shelves well? I wonder would you and I agree about what we like?"

"I read novels," said Vivien. "I don't often get books in here. I can get what I want at Mudie's."

"Of course you read novels," said Alison; "but I suppose not only novels?"

"Yes," said Vivien, "only novels. I am reading *A Superfluous Woman* now, and before that I read *The Story of an African Farm* and *The Heavenly Twins*."

She hoped Alison would be shocked. She was aggressively anxious to show her emancipation.

But if Alison was shocked she did not show it.

She only said: "My dear child, what a muddle your head must be in! I am afraid I don't particularly admire your choice of literature."

Vivien, braced for a struggle, failed to discover Alison's opinion either in her looks or words.

The conversation dragged, and was not enlivened till Milly and Johnny made their appearance reconciled.

They made much of Alison, covering their sister's coldness, while she sat aloof. They insisted on an afternoon being found when Miss Carnegie should take them

to the Zoölogical Gardens, which not even Johnny despised.

Alison broke into a future busy day for their sake. Perhaps it was as much a work of charity as anything she could do in the slums.

Vivien looked on with angry coldness. When Alison left, followed clingingly to the hall door by the lonely children, she went upstairs to her own room and shut herself in.

Her head was whirling confusedly with anger and misery; she realized her own unhappiness with a certain outside pity, and felt bitterly against the others. They were false and heartless and forgetful.

Vivien lay face downward on her bed, and longed, making fierce, wild bargains with God, for her mother, till she looked up, almost expecting to see her there, brought somehow by the knowledge of her child's want.

Vivien had been a particularly happy girl. She had admiringly adored her mother, enslaving herself to her after the fashion in which the most selfish member in a family sometimes finds herself served.

In return, Vivien had been spoiled and indulged, and made at times a companion; no holiday request of hers had ever been refused. She had never been really in the schoolroom.

There had not been actual disagreements between her father and mother in Vivien's memory; each had gone his or her own way, and she had grown up seeing, but in no wise judging. Occasional passionate out-

breaks of complaint from her mother had won her partisanship, but scarcely troubled her, coming as they did in the ordinary course of events.

To Vivien the time when the child's acceptance of the parent becomes necessarily merged in the man or woman's judgment of another man or woman had come in a shock—not, as to most, by degrees.

There had been a day when she had awakened to the sense of some terrible thing—when a mystery, discussed everywhere in whispers, hung over the house, and her mother was not there, and had left silence behind her.

Vivien had grown to know, asking no questions, and the knowledge had come as an unsolved puzzle.

It was driven upon her for the first time that her mother could do wrong, and with that came a doubt of everything—and a doubt, eagerly seized, of what constituted right and wrong. Snatching at apologies for her mother, Vivien remembered the words against her father which had slipped over her mind before.

The last thing which her mother had said to her was in an outbreak of premature jealousy at the possibility of influence being gained by Alison Carnegie in the home she was deserting. Viva cherished the unwise words fiercely.

The young ones might forget or be careless; she would forget nothing.

Jossy, who had been the dearest, should surely have felt a little of the trouble.

She had heard him in dispute with a proposal for

bed not three days after he had lost his mother. "I have no mother now," he had said, almost in the tone of a boast, "and so I needn't go to bed till I like."

Since then he had either forgotten or been silenced.

Among the others, their mother's name had never been mentioned.

Vivien had puzzled out the mystery for herself, with the help of odd words and scraps in the papers and much thought. At that time a review of a book, written after the fashion of much present-day literature, had fallen into her hands. She had read it with an opening glimpse of many things, and then she had sent for and read the book itself, finding much in it which unaided she would not have found.

This first had been followed by many others. Into the mind of an entirely ignorant girl, rudely brushed for the first time by a life problem, these brought increasing confusion.

Vivien began to read at first with a view to an understanding about her mother. She went on, gaining a curiously false, distorted knowledge, and finding an excitement in her half discoveries which shut unhappiness and dulness out.

She even secretly helped herself on by dictionaries, by the Bible, by medical books which lay on the library shelves. There was nobody to interfere with her or to heed what she did.

The consequence was an inextricable confusion of ignorance and knowledge filling her mind, and bringing

a strange excitement with it. Without understanding herself, she was restless and miserable, bewildered by half revelations, showing her glimpses of the wickedness and horror of the world and none of its beauty.

Before she was eighteen the freshness was being rubbed out of her girlhood.

CHAPTER VI.

MEREDYTH had shut himself into his study to wrestle with his article. He considered himself sufficiently well supplied with ideas, and sat down, choosing himself a new pen with confidence.

Was there anything fresh to be said about Norway or fishing there? Something—something cynical and sparkling upon the literature of the period commended itself to him more. Or a social matter, dealing with club life?

Meredyth bit his pen and pondered. He wanted a striking beginning—something to take a reader's interest at once. When the first sentence was written the rest would come easily.

What subject should he choose? An idea, half formed, of a racing or coaching story—something to do with the horses he loved—flooded everything else out of his head till he began to try and put his thoughts to paper.

The first sentence, the opening one, would not get itself written.

He had rarely written a line, save the barest business communication, for eighteen years, and he had

no habit to help him in the concentration of his thoughts. They floated from one subject to another, confusing him utterly.

An idea from his visit to Norway got into the middle of a half-finished sentence upon literature, and was in its turn driven out by the memory of a winter day's run.

He drew a pile of Spectators to him, and cribbed shamelessly from two or three articles to compose a first sentence for himself. Then he wrote on obstinately, finding his ideas gone.

At the end of his first page he read over what he had written, and felt himself disgusted. There was nothing of his meaning in the words he had found; adjectives heaped upon each other, "ands" and "ors" tripped each other up. He tore the paper deliberately across and across.

He tried once again, his vanity standing his friend, and making him unwilling to confess himself beaten in what had seemed so easy.

But the hopefulness and confidence of his first beginning had gone, and sentences would not form themselves.

He threw down his pen in despair, and went off to Mrs. Fraser-Latimer to get reinstated in his own opinion.

He remembered that Alison was going out to dinner, and sent her a bouquet, with a note saying that he must stick to his own way of going, though he thanked her.

And so he probably would have done had there been no money pressure upon him. But bills continued to pour in, accompanied sometimes by unpleasant incidents, and as yet nothing was arranged about the lease of the house or Evelyn's settlement upon the children.

A shortness in ready money began to make itself most unpleasantly felt.

Meredyth held faint hopes of retrieving himself till the Derby and Ascot were over. He won and lost alternately, and came out in the end a few paltry pounds to the good.

Vivien went to Ascot in Mrs. Fraser-Latimer's charge, and against her father's wishes and conscience.

Nobody considered it his or her business to remonstrate, though his sister-in-law, Lady Meredyth, did say a word of surprise, and would have said more had she not been conscious that an invitation from herself might well have been forthcoming.

Henry Meredyth never cared to say no, especially to Mrs. Fraser-Latimer. He shrugged his shoulders, and supposed it wouldn't matter.

It was Vivien's first social experience, proving an infinitely bad beginning. She enjoyed herself feverishly, and without experience to judge the people she was with.

A young guardsman named Maurice devoted himself to her after the free-and-easy fashion possible in such a party. He sat beside her on the way home on the coach, and found that she failed to understand when

his foot touched hers, but was encouragingly remonstrant when he caught her hand and pressed it.

Vivien, in the excitement of the past day, of the evening, and a first man's admiration, was entirely beyond her own control or comprehension. These last few months had almost swept away the landmarks of girl's instinct, and left her with no firm ground and no guidance.

It was an intoxicating, wonderful drive to her.

Meredyth remarked nothing. With him Vivien was awkward and speechless. A barrier of silence lay between them.

He felt daily less uncomfortable about Mrs. Fraser-Latimer's fancy for his daughter. She was very good-natured, and, after all, there were many worse women, he told himself, shifting aside responsibility.

Meantime he continued to let his own affairs slide much as he let Viva's.

It was actually through Mrs. Fraser-Latimer that he first grew to realize his position thoroughly.

One day he happened to have the misfortune to be discovered by her in Bond Street. He knew it was a misfortune from the moment he saw himself beckoned to her carriage, because he knew Mrs. Fraser-Latimer.

She had a convenient niece with her—she never went about alone—and he realized that he would be expected to take both to tea at the club, and would have been glad to escape so lightly.

But this was not Mrs. Fraser-Latimer's way. She got out of her carriage and announced her intention of

shopping, and Meredyth knew what that meant and who would pay.

According to his duty and his habit, he professed himself delighted, measuring his pace to suit hers, and steering her through the passers-by.

He knew what was expected of him when she came to a halt before a jeweller's window and fell to admiration of a diamond safety-pin brooch, just needed, she said, to complete the lace at her throat.

Meredyth took the hint, and had known broader ones.

He had a personal liking for jewelry. He never wore more than an elaborate scarf-pin, with the plainest of studs and sleeve links; but he had scarf-pins at home which would almost have given him a change for every day of the year, and odds and ends of jewelry littered his table.

The people in the shop knew him well, and came at once to serve him, bringing trays of safety pins, through which Mrs. Fraser-Latimer still stuck to her first choice.

"It's all right," Meredyth said to the man.—"Let me fasten it in for you, Mrs. Fraser-Latimer."

But when he put out his hand for the brooch the shopman held back.

"We can send it for you, sir," he said, "with pleasure."

"No, thank you," said Meredyth in his slowest voice.

"But—I believe there will be something required—

the pin to be strengthened—if I might send the brooch later? ”

Meredyth saw the surprise in Mrs. Fraser-Latimer's eyes, and spoke sharply. The man still failed to yield, and made a polite excuse for speaking to his principal, who drew Henry aside.

“ Perhaps,” he said, “ you would care to pay for this? ”

“ You can put it down to my account,” said Meredyth, colouring. “ You know who I am.”

The jeweller did not say that in this knowledge lay the reason of his hesitation, but he looked it.

“ I am very sorry, sir, very sorry indeed to disoblige you; but I believe our bill is rather a heavy one, and we have sent it in twice. I regret exceedingly that it is our rule.”

Meredyth also regretted it exceedingly. The awkwardness of his position was felt by him with especial acuteness, and could not be carried off with a laugh.

The idea of what Mrs. Fraser-Latimer must think and would say crimsoned his face, and showed him to her absolutely nervous for the first time.

It did more. It lost her the last remains of his careless allegiance; it made an end of his pleasure in her society.

When he got home he began to turn over in his mind very seriously what was to be done, and Vivien chose this opportune moment to come to him about money.

She had put off the evil day as long as possible, not

because the idea of any difficulty had ever occurred to her mind, but simply from a warped feeling of loyalty to her mother, which made her unwilling to ask her father for anything.

But the outside unpleasantness of people calling importunately for their money, and of complaints among the disorganized servants, conquered her unwillingness.

After dinner, which had passed with gaps of silence, she spoke to him with some difficulty.

"Father," she said, reddening a little with her words, "can you let me have some money? Mrs. Davis says she owes the servants for two months, and there are my dresses——"

Meredyth finished peeling a pear deliberately, carefully keeping the peel unbroken, and taking it off in a long serpent.

"I should be most happy," he said smoothly, "but I haven't got money to give you."

"Not got it!"

Vivien stared at him in an extremity of astonishment, with half suspicion of a joke. Money had come to her so entirely as a matter of course all her life!

Her father felt his pockets, bringing out a pile of silver with a sprinkling of gold; he pushed the little heap across the table to her.

"I am afraid that won't be much use to you," he said, "but it is absolutely all I have got."

"But what—what has happened? Where is all our money gone?"

Thoughts flew through Vivien's head. Visions of a smash—of the breaking of a bank—came to her first, and then the truth dawned upon her vaguely. The money had been her mother's. Her mother's too frank speech in anger had long ago taught her daughter this, but for the first time she began to realize it.

Meredyth watched her curiously, wondering if he would be called upon to explain coarsely. He saw the inward look of seeking recollection, and then the flash of memory and gradual change of expression. Vivien's first feeling was an excitement not far off joy; the prospect of a change—of something which was going to happen—came upon her mind pleasantly.

She turned to her father again with a growing look of energy and determination which hid her likeness to him.

"What are you going to do?" she said.

Meredyth covered an artificial yawn, less at ease than he wished to look.

"I wish I knew," he said.

There was a certain dignity in Viva's position that pleased her.

She was talking to her father as a grown-up woman, ready to take her part as a woman. She had all a child's eagerness to begin to *live* and a child's fearlessness to face what was new.

"But, father," she said, "mayn't I know? Don't you think I ought to know how much we shall have to live on?"

Meredyth leaned back in his chair, and in doing

so caught sight of himself in the looking-glass of the sideboard and put up his hand instinctively to smooth his hair with a movement which always irritated Viva.

"I don't know how much we shall have to live upon," he said; "probably a few hundreds."

Hundreds conveyed little idea to Vivien's mind. She paused, thinking too intently to be conscious of her father's scrutiny. He was watching her with some interest and amusement.

It was the first evening he had dined at home for some weeks, and a certain sense of consequent virtue supported him through Viva's questions.

When she spoke again, he saw it was with some definite ideas.

"Father, does this house belong to us?" she said.

He shook his head, and began to roll himself a cigarette—he always made his own.

"Then why can't we go at once—to-morrow—and live in some house that will cost less?"

"My dear child, you don't understand," said Meredyth.

Viva passed over the insult to her years, and brought herself to answer cheerfully.

"I don't understand, but I want to understand," she said.

"Well, we have a lease of the house—for so many years."

She pondered over this.

"But can't we sell the lease? Can't that be done?"

she said carefully. She weighed her words, afraid she would give her father an opening for laughter.

"I suppose so," he said.

"And get rid of the servants? Why not sell the lease, and dismiss all the servants except one or two, and go away—to-morrow?"

Meredyth did laugh now, to her indignation. There were a great many things to be done first, he said, and explained that to act in such a hurried manner would be a false economy. Viva was damped, being full of a wish to do something at once. She insisted on an explanation as to the first step. Meredyth turned his cigarette about in his fingers, and finally lighted it as a hint for her departure, but she was too eager even to notice what he was doing.

"Is there any good in waiting?" she said. "Why not write to the lawyers at once, or whoever has to do with the house?"

"Now?" said Meredyth, dismayed. "What is the good of writing now? The letter couldn't be posted at this hour of the night."

"Why not?" said Viva. "And, at any rate, it might as well be written. Will you write, father?"

She was eager to feel something done, but she would not descend to entreaties with her father. Her will overcame his, however; he was utterly overwhelmed by her energy, coming on the top of the unpleasant incident of the afternoon. He made lessening protest, and felt it slighter trouble to yield.

Vivien amused while she bothered him; she was so

wise and yet so foolish—such a woman and yet so entirely childish. She was more successful than an older person might have been, in that she did not make him feel himself in a second place.

As for Vivien, the idea of a change, and of the necessity for her to exert herself, did her much good, driving away for the time the unwholesome, terrible ideas which overwhelmed her mind. It seemed as if a black cloud had lifted from her that evening, and Viva thought it was gone for ever.

She was full of wild ideas of what she would do, how she would work for the others, and how comfortable she would make their new home. What great things she would do for them, she thought, classing her father with the children with a half-conscious contempt, which he would have found unbearable!

There was a joy, too, in the idea of her mother watching over them as a providence, ready, as Viva felt confident she would be, to help them if it was ever necessary. With this thought she did not feel so utterly lost.

Viva had dreams, visions, of her meeting again with her mother, and in some illogical way this money loss seemed to make her dreams clearer.

She had caught no clear conception of Major Arkwright-Gage in his new position to her mother. The coarsening and unhealthiness in her mind had not as yet reached her mother. She knew without realizing.

When she had left him, Meredyth stretched himself

out and smoked exhaustedly. But he was not uninfluenced, and pondered over occupations to be sought for.

His reason told him that that way lay almost insurmountable difficulties, but his good opinion of himself, shaken but not destroyed, warred with his reason.

CHAPTER VII.

“FATHER, is it true? Is it true what this letter says?”

Vivien’s eyes were full of excitement and anger. She flung down a crumpled letter before her father, then half moved to snatch it away again from the pollution of his touch.

Meredyth never allowed himself to grow excited. He drew the letter toward him quietly after a pause to see if Viva’s movement of withdrawal meant anything, and he read deliberately, without outward sign of disturbance.

Vivien waited, quivering with impatience. She broke in again before he had finished, asking hotly if it was true.

Meredyth raised his light eyes slowly to her face.

“Well?” he said.

Vivien stamped on the floor without knowing what she was doing.

“You want to know if what is said in this very ill-judged and excited epistle is true? Certainly it is true that I have had a letter threatening the withdrawal of a promised settlement upon you children unless I consent to allow her to see you.”

“Money! Who cares about money?” cried Vivien in an outburst. “What I want to know is, is it true that, when you had a letter begging and imploring that she should have permission to see—her own children—even once a year—you refused—*my mother?*”

There was a world of tenderness and protection in the way Viva said the word.

She faced her father, passionately defiant.

“Certainly I refused,” said Meredyth.

He had not believed even Evelyn capable of writing to her daughter like this, with hysterical complaints of him and of her own misery.

He kept an air of injured indifference with some difficulty.

“You did what you knew would break her heart and mine without even telling me. You knew I wouldn’t stand it!”

“Won’t you sit down, Vivien? It is absurd to talk like this, my dear. Anybody would say that I was right——”

“I don’t care what anybody says! I know that nobody will keep me from my own mother if she wants me—not you or any one else.”

Meredyth felt himself tempted to a coarse word of truth about Major Arkwright-Gage, but he held it back.

“Viva,” he said, “be a sensible girl. There is no good in discussing this, and in any case the question isn’t immediate. If your mother had considered you

and not herself, she would never have asked you to see her."

Vivien was fighting with burning tears of anger.

"You were cruel enough to her when she was here," she said; "you needn't speak cruelly now she is gone! It is your doing—*all*."

Meredyth recognised an unconscious quotation from her mother. He was not a man who grew easily angry, or showed it when he did.

Now he only sat a little more stiffly, and spoke more deliberately, with an obstinate set of his chin.

"Who may be to blame, my dear Vivien, it is not for you to decide. I shall not allow you to visit your mother, as matters stand at present."

"If my mother wants me, I shall go," said Vivien, showing him a look in her face like his own.

Meredyth shrugged his shoulders, and let her words pass.

"I believe," he said, "Evelyn speaks of inclosing money in her letter. I do not care for you to receive money in that way, as a sort of bribe. Will you give it to me to return, if you please?"

Vivien put her hands behind her back, symbolizing her determination.

"Money from my mother can never be a bribe. She knows I need no bribe to long to see her. You may be able, as she says, to take the little ones from her, but never me—never—never!"

"That is enough said," Meredyth interrupted coldly. "I shall know how to make you obey me. Will you

oblige me by mending the split I see in your dress, and perhaps putting on a cleaner collar? Good-morning."

There was something of petty spitefulness in his last words—words which would, he knew, touch Vivien's pride.

He walked deliberately out of the room, saving dignity in his retreat.

Nevertheless, he felt himself worsted. He was ruffled, irritated, perplexed.

Mrs. Fraser-Latimer's day being past, it was quite natural for him to turn to Alison Carnegie for comfort. He had not been to see her almost for weeks, but now he went unhesitatingly, knowing that Alison ruled herself in all things not to take offence easily.

When he found she was not at home, he felt an unreasonable indignation; but having come so far, and set his mind upon a talk with her, he waited.

Alison came in tired and a little worried by a disappointing day's work. When she heard that Meredyth was there, she went first to her room, dipping her face into cool water, and allowing herself a minute or two to rest and smooth the tired lines out of her forehead.

She looked fresh and strong and cheerful when she came in to him.

"This is nice of you, Henry," she said, finding herself a soft armchair and sinking restfully into it. "I hope you haven't had long to wait?"

"I always come to you, Alice, when things go wrong. I am about at the end of my patience."

"I am exceedingly glad to hear it," Alison said. "I consider what you call patience your worst vice."

Meredyth looked bewildered.

"I have been trying to get something to do," he said, "but it seems to be impossible. Nobody in any profession—or trade, for the matter of that—can entertain the idea of finding me of use. I am afraid I may write myself down a failure."

It was quite obvious that he did not think so—so obvious that Alison let a little sad amusement come into her face.

"I have written and called, and made myself cheap generally," said Meredyth, unintentionally exaggerating the extent of his efforts, "and it all seems hopeless. The children are the worst of it."

"But they are provided for, aren't they?"

Meredyth explained, making little of the fact that if he had exerted himself there would have been a settlement on the children long before this. He told of Evelyn's letters to him and of the last one to Vivien, which had made trouble.

"It means, of course, that Arkwright-Gage is beginning to develop himself. She was quite happy so long as he was a slave. Now she must have another excitement."

Alison would have wished him to speak less hardly, but she excused him, feeling he had a right to be hard.

"And this brings Vivien defying me. I told her I would make her obey me, but how can I? I can't use force."

Alison listened meditatively. Meredyth, who generally found a silent acquiescence sufficient, this day, in a depression, wanted more.

"Don't you think I am right?" he said.

"Partly. Right in what you want, but not in the way you are trying to get it. There is no use in threatening when you can't carry out your threats."

"But what am I to do? What is to be done with Vivien? Can I let her go and see her mother while she is living with that man?"

"No," said Alison; "no, I think not."

"Well, how under heaven am I to prevent it? Is it my fault that Vivien is as self-willed and obstinate as a mule?"

"I think it is partly your fault," said Alison.

Meredyth coloured, his manner stiffening immediately.

Alison went on very gravely. It had come to her that this once, if he chose, he should hear the truth. She realized clearly that it might mean the loss of him out of her life, but it seemed that nothing else would really touch him.

"I think," she said, "it has been a pity to let Viva be with Mrs. Fraser-Latimer. More than that, I think it has been wrong."

Meredyth lay back, stroking his mustache.

"Wrong or right," he said, "how could I prevent it?"

"It is *very* hard for you, Henry, altogether," said Alison softly. "And it is easy for people a little out-

side, as I am, to speak. But—if you knew how people talk!”

“It’s a new thing,” he said roughly, “for you to mind how people talk.”

“I hope not new,” said Alison. “One has to face their talking sometimes, but it is always a pity. But no young girl should be allowed to face it blindfold. I don’t want to vex you, Henry, and it is hard to see a help; but to say nothing is like standing aside to see a little child murdered.”

“I don’t understand at all what you are talking about,” said Meredyth stiffly.

“And then there is that young Maurice——”

“Maurice!” said Meredyth, drawing a breath. “Why, that is absurd! Neither he nor Vivien has a farthing, and they are a couple of children.”

“But it seems a pity to start Viva—or both of them—in life with a heartache.”

“Absurd!” Meredyth said. “A couple of children!”

They were older than he and Alison had been. He had quite forgotten, but the memory crippled Alison’s words.

She had “got over it,” of course, and faced life, but she had faced it handicapped. The knowledge made her very anxious to save Vivien, while the girl’s dislike interfered with her personal action.

Meredyth meditated.

“I am a failure,” he said, “in every relation of life.”

He spoke the words to have them contradicted, but there was a new ring of uncertainty in his voice.

Alison forced herself to be silent, resisting the temptation to make him happy.

He went on speaking, almost as if excusing himself.

"My life has gone crooked somehow," he said; "it would have been different if I had married somebody else."

Silence. Alison sat still, not looking at him.

He turned to her a little impatiently.

"Wouldn't it?" he said. "Don't you see how my marriage ruined me?"

She saw he waited for an answer.

"Don't be a coward," she said; "face your own share of blame."

There was a pause.

"Then you think," Meredyth said in a freezing voice, "that I am putting my own sins on Evelyn's shoulders?"

"I think that you are to blame about Evelyn. I think that if you had been a better husband she would have been a better wife."

Meredyth got up and stood, his fingers playing with the books on a table near.

"I should like," he said politely, "to understand fully. Do you accuse me of unfaithfulness?"

Alison looked much the most moved. She was trembling.

"I don't accuse you of anything, Henry," she said

in a low voice. "I have no right to speak, only just that we have been friends so long."

"Save me from my friends!" Meredyth said, with something like a sneer.

"I do think you were careless with Evelyn, and unkind without meaning it——"

He interrupted her.

"You believe that I may blame myself for what has happened?"

"Henry——"

"You believe that I may blame myself for what has happened?"

Alison's "Yes" was drawn from her, and she could not find words to qualify it.

Meredyth took his hat and stick, and said good-bye, just touching her hand.

He was very white. The world seemed shaking around him. Alison's words seemed to upset all his beliefs, and leave him with nothing firm.

He walked home in a dream.

On the stairs he met the children in the middle of an excited game of play which had burst all bounds.

Jossy ran to him, and begged for his assistance in a search for the housemaid, who had found herself an unduly skilful hiding place.

He was full of a just finished game of blind-man's-buff in the nursery, and tried to exact a promise for the future from his father.

Meredyth put him aside, not unkindly, and spoke of chess later on. He noticed Jossy's delicate look, and

that Milly's hair was tangled and half brushed and her frock dirty. He asked for Vivien, and heard she had gone out in the carriage with Mrs. Fraser-Latimer.

Then he went upstairs to his room. A bad husband, a bad father, a useless figure in the world. If Alison thought all this of him, what must others think?

He caught sight of himself in the glass, and noticed lines under his eyes and the bald beginning more conspicuous than usual.

"I am a failure," he said for the third time, and this time with full meaning.

CHAPTER VIII.

HENRY MEREDYTH, in hearing plain words for the first time, was a man to pity. He had sauntered through life comfortably, not examining himself, content to know that he was not a man of coarse vices.

If revealing words had come from any one but Alison, he might have laid them to ill will, and so put them aside; but Alison he had always known as his friend.

In the loneliness of his room he grew to see himself stripped of comfortable illusions. His half-forgotten self of twenty years ago came to his memory, full of eagerness and ambitions, all connected with Alison, and fostered by her. In all these years of life he had done nothing, fulfilled nothing, got no further forward.

He rushed to the extreme of intense self-depreciation. A failure!

Pride, vanity, indolence, rebelled vainly against the verdict.

With the morning he saw himself less clearly, and a dogged desire to prove himself worth more than Alison thought came to the help of his hopelessness.

He collected the papers and took them to the smoking-room, searching for possible advertisements, and finding a few that he thought it worth while to answer.

He set himself to the dreary task of composing an advertisement.

“A gentleman who has had much experience of”—*what?*

“A gentleman in temporary difficulties”—that sounded too much like the beginning of a begging letter.

“Situation wanted. A gentleman will be glad to accept any situation”—the ending that seemed to form itself to this was, “with a good salary and nothing to do.”

The vagueness of his desires and a shaken belief in his capabilities were against him.

The thought of helping himself by writing himself “son of an earl” was not to be held.

He rebelled against the idea of using his friends, but nevertheless forced himself to one or two stilted letters, almost resentful in their fear of seeming humble.

His knowledge of his brother’s slight opinion of him kept him from a letter to Lord Meredyth, who would probably have been able and willing to help him. It might come to that in the end, but not yet.

When he had signed his name to a few curt notes, he rang to have them taken away to avoid change of purpose.

Evelyn’s letter remained to answer, costing him an hour’s time and many sheets of paper. He could not bring himself either to leave hers unanswered or to refer her to his solicitors.

But it was hard to find useful words to say—words that she would consider final.

Evelyn herself had found no such difficulty. Her sentences rushed upon each other, sometimes confusing the sense. She was miserable, and she wanted her children, or at least the promise of them.

This, with a barely veiled and bitter allusion to Major Arkwright-Gage, was the gist of her letter.

With the reading of it Meredyth felt as if the scene in court had been a dream, and his bonds hurt.

The children were all at lunch, dashing into conversations of their own without heed of their father.

Johnny and Viva gibed incessantly, and Johnny drank loudly, in a way his father found offensive, and showed himself very particular about his food.

Jossy was peevish, and declared himself teased, and Milly offended Meredyth's eye worst of all, she was so contentedly dishevelled and untidy.

He turned first upon Johnny.

"Johnny, are you drinking wine, and so much?"

Johnny had a fine manner of sullenness.

"Not more than usual," he said; "I always have some."

"It is ridiculous, a boy of your age. A glass of claret—or ale, if you prefer it—is quite enough, and all you are to have in future. Do you hear me?"

Johnny stared indignantly.

"And, Viva, can't you see that Milly's hair is brushed?"

Both girls fired up. These sudden observations from their father were unprecedented.

Meredyth's new-found virtue continued to make him unpopular.

That afternoon, hearing that Lord Maurice was there, he made his way to the drawing-room, proving very unwelcome.

Maurice and Viva received him resentfully, especially Viva, who took small trouble to hide her feelings.

Meredyth held his place, and exhausted himself to find a common topic with Maurice, who was dull and shy. He saw exchanges of glances between the two, helped by Alison's warning.

When he saw Maurice would not go, he took him off and endured him in the smoking-room.

He struggled for a word of warning to Vivien, but his courage failed, and he persuaded himself the hint would be sufficient.

After this one day he found the path of virtue too thorny, and relapsed slightly.

He followed up any answers to advertisements which seemed in the smallest degree hopeful. Most of them did not.

One lady wrote with a view to matrimony, suggesting a meeting. A man, whose rather vague advertisement he had answered, took him for a woman, adding to a request for a photograph that he found his wife uncongenial, and searched for a sweet, bright, young girl who would go abroad with him as his niece.

The more hopeful ones found Meredyth fail in qualifications.

The days took long to pass. There was not the usual satisfaction to be found at the club, and want of money and credit interfered with everything.

People were beginning to leave town. The usual invitations came, if a trifle less plentifully, seeing that Meredyth had more or less fallen out of society, but were unacceptable, owing to the children and the absence of money for etceteras and tips, always a heavy item.

Lord Meredyth had invited all the children later on.

With them their father made shy, self-conscious attempts to ingratiate himself, to their unconcealed astonishment. Only Jossy welcomed him.

Vivien was unapproachable.

She chose to blame her father for a certain slackening in young Maurice's attention.

The young man was not altogether to blame. He was not a bad youth, though a fool, and Viva had cheapened herself to him.

She had her father's adaptability to the people she was with, coupled with an unwholesome curiosity for new sensations.

Maurice found her amusing, but she palled, and she shocked him. Vivien, full of a dangerous half knowledge, said things in ignorance which even Mrs. Fraser-Latimer would not have said, and Maurice was too young to give her credit for half knowledge.

He judged her, believing her capable of defending

herself, and gave her no young girl's consideration. No one could have needed it more.

Viva read her novels all day long, beginning to find those with no curious, unwholesome flavour insipid.

She listened with edification to Mrs. Fraser-Latimer's stories, and made herself careless to men.

Once, too late, Meredyth made an effort to separate her from Mrs. Fraser-Latimer.

That lady's gay greeting of him as "Pat," and seeming oblivion of their last meeting, conquered him.

She found Vivien useful, as the usual niece or cousin happened to be absent, and in her way she was good-natured, too, and anxious that the girl should enjoy herself.

Vivien listened dutifully to all she said, and hugely admired her.

Mrs. Fraser-Latimer had a story about every one; she knew all the undercurrents of lives, or thought she did, which was equally satisfactory.

To go out with her was like carrying on the reading of those disturbing books, and without their preparation would have disgusted Viva.

Mrs. Fraser-Latimer spared Viva's aunt more than an innuendo, but she had stories of all the other women who drove past them in the park or stood with them on the stairs at crushes, and of the men hints of dark things.

The misery of it all crushed down upon the girl, and the commonness.

Mrs. Fraser-Latimer tarred all the same, bringing her to think of it as what must be.

Viva grew to be unwilling to be alone or to think, and there came a look into her face that spoiled her youth.

Alison Carnegie broke a ten days' silence, which her pride would have continued, for Viva's sake.

She sent her a note, ignoring her father, and asking if she with Johnny would come to dine and later go to a couple of dances.

Vivien yielded to temptation, putting the blame on Johnny's wishes, and escaping a strained evening with her father. She solaced her mind with the assurance that it would make no difference.

Alison's was the one wholesome influence upon the girl's life.

CHAPTER IX.

“THE initial point is to raise the people—to get them better fed and more self-helpful, and the first step is to put a stop to the early and improvident marriages——”

“The initial point is to bring you to the end of that very long speech,” said Alison.

Abram Sassoon coloured, and then laughed. He was very young, very eager, and very self-confident.

“I know,” he said, “after making a lot of speeches, a fellow is inclined to talk always as if he was making speeches.”

“And the great point in talking and writing is to say what you have to say in the fewest and simplest words possible.”

Sassoon rebelled at this, which came from O’Neil. The two were always hot for argument.

“But Carlyle—Browning—George Meredith——”

O’Neil laughed out. “Listen to him, Miss Carnegie! Hasn’t he got the devil’s own cheek!”

Vivien, rather conscious of being overlooked, listened, half idly.

Abram Sassoon turned to her.

“But isn’t there something in what I say? An

underfed, overworked creature only lives a half-awake sort of existence, and there's starvation there—body and mind. Don't you know how torpid the brain feels when you are tired? My God! these people are *always* tired! I say, feed them first, amuse them next, and then if, like O'Neil here, you think it necessary, proceed to make Christians of them. But make complete human beings first. There's a confounded lot of putting the cart before the horse, both with Jews and Christians."

"You speak in truisms, my friend," said O'Neil, laughing—his laugh came very readily. "And you wander from the point, which is whether I am right to get up and encourage boxing competitions or not."

"You approve, don't you, Miss Carnegie?" Abram Sassoon said eagerly. "You see, their lives and their treatment have turned these men into animals. They *must* hit some one. If they aren't allowed to hit each other in a properly organized way, it will be their wives. You must begin at the bottom and work up."

There was danger of Vivien being forgotten in the mutual interests of the others. She roused herself to listen, bringing her mind to bear on this new development. This style of conversation was very different from Lord Maurice's.

With the vanity of youth, she found it strange that these young men were desirous to talk to Alison and not to her—to Alison, who in her eyes was quite an old woman.

They were eagerly full of their interests and confident that she shared them.

Alison, afraid that Viva would find it dull, and more anxious about her than about the others, proposed a round game, with Johnny put forward as a reason."

"We mustn't talk shop," she said. "You two are dreadful. I am always struggling to prevent my women from becoming like King Charles's head."

Abram Sassoon became eagerly interested and excited over his cards, facing loss of counters with the deepest annoyance, but O'Neil's attention was divided. He still burst out at intervals with references to the controversy over his boxing competitions, which was raging hot in his parish.

Sassoon, the more practicable of the two, laughed at him.

"O'Neil is always in trouble," he said. "In Ireland it was with his parishioners, because he would wear little petticoats and things. Here it is with the clergy over his debasing amusements. Did you ever hear the story of O'Neil's rector in Ireland and the altar cloth with a cross on it?"

"Don't let him get started," said O'Neil, colouring; "he tells a story worse than you can imagine."

"Not worse than you do," Sassoon said; "at least, I don't laugh from beginning to end of my story, so that no one can hear from it what I am talking about. You must know that a lady made O'Neil's rector the present of a most magnificent altar cloth, with I. H. S. or a cross

or both, worked in the middle, and the first Sunday this was put up there was the most fearful outcry among the parishioners. Afterward they tried to break in to the vestry and steal it away, and the rector had to have it guarded night and day. But the parishioners weren't going to be beaten. One day, in the middle of service, six stalwart men walked up and seized the altar cloth. The rector was a man of pluck; he wasn't going to be defeated in the face of the congregation——”

O'Neil moved impatiently. It was as coming from Sassoon, who was a Jew, that he particularly disliked this kind of story.

“So the rector seized his end of the altar cloth just as it was being snatched away, and pulled his hardest, though, alas! it was the strength of one man against six. The cloth held, and so did everybody else, and the amazed congregation beheld their rector gradually dragged into the vestry, still stoutly clinging. I rather think O'Neil was hanging on too, but this part of the story isn't authenticated.”

“Likely, indeed!” O'Neil said, and laughed, rather vexed. He hoped, he said, not to meet Sassoon thirty or forty years hence, for he was preparing himself the old age of a bore.

The conversation wandered and floated. O'Neil and Sassoon held it for the most part; they were bubbling with plans and theories.

Later Johnny went home, and the rest went to their dance.

Sassoon, on a hint from Alison, found a chance to talk to Viva alone.

He had given her, for the most part, a share of the talk that had been for Johnny. He broadened his survey of her now, and spoke differently.

"Miss Meredyth," he said, "I wish we could persuade you to help us at the East End. It is girls like you—bright, pretty girls—we want."

He spoke in elderly and dispassionate fashion, which contrasted oddly with his very youthful appearance. He was a handsome young fellow, with just enough of the Jew about his face to characterize him, and an eager manner which attracted people. It was all the same to Sassoon who he talked to, and he was utterly without self-consciousness.

Vivien, unnecessarily on her guard with mankind, found him strange.

That all men were the worst of sinners was a conclusion she had found herself vaguely drawn to, and she felt suspiciously for a motive.

"If there is anything to do, I should like to *do* anything," she said.

"Anything to do!" Sassoon repeated, with volumes in his voice.

"Well, I can't preach," said Viva, "and I can't box."

Sassoon leaned forward eagerly.

"It's not Brian O'Neil you are talking to. Food and amusement are what I want to get. Of course, it is the Jews I am most covetous for, but one can't keep

narrowed in. All the same, I'm not an orthodox Jew; I couldn't be, after Eton and Oxford. But I consider them the grandest people with the grandest religion in the world."

Viva felt herself growing in sympathy by being talked to as if she must sympathize. She had before been half pitying Sassoon to herself for being a Jew, feeling it as a disadvantage to him.

Her eager face drew him on.

"I am sure you won't laugh at me," he said, "if I tell you my one dream. I want to get us all back to Jerusalem—to make us a nation again before I die."

Sassoon's eyes shone.

"But you never will," Vivien said.

"Never? Why, we are going back already—*pouring* into the Holy Land. Don't you think it is a grand purpose for life? Something to live for, grudging each day? If one could even live long enough to see them growing fit to go, and leave others ready to finish!"

Vivien was intensely interested. As about everything else, she wanted to know all about this, and was ready to listen to Sassoon as long as he wished. She brought her mind, following his, to take his place, and took fire from his enthusiasm.

"I am talking to you," said he, "as if you were a Jewess."

He was talking for his own sake now, having begun by trying to interest Vivien in their work at Alison's request.

It was a queer, youthful conversation, starting with

the reform of the world, and ending in an exchange of ages and a description of Sassoon's puppies. He was equally eager about everything.

Vivien was amazed to find that there were not two years between them, Sassoon's life seemed so much in earnest.

She found herself talking easily and readily to him.

All his hopes were more or less mixed up with his nation. He lived among Jews as far as he could, and would marry only a Jewess. He defended their ceremonies, which he did not observe, asking Viva if any other nation would have kept distinct as the Jews had through hundreds of scattered years.

He took it for granted that this and many other things had been matters of thought to her.

With their talk fresh in her mind, Viva was almost cordial to Miss Carnegie in the cloak-room.

"Will you take me to a people's concert at the East End on Thursday?" she said, without her usual unwillingness to ask a favour. "Mr. Sassoon wants me to go, and to play the violin."

"I shall be very glad," said Alison, looking it, "and I will take you to tea with Mr. O'Neil's mother afterward. You will find that interesting. Have you managed to like Abram Sassoon, his name notwithstanding?"

"Yes, he is nice," Viva said, "in spite of his being a Jew."

"I wish he could hear you say that!" said Alison, laughing; "in *spite*, indeed!"

They were a very cheerful party going home. Alison had been nervously anxious that Viva should enjoy herself, and the result was better than anything she had hoped for.

She felt it ridiculous that she should colour for pleasure whenever Viva spoke to her in her new, friendly voice.

CHAPTER X.

VIVIEN had enjoyed herself exceedingly, and the excitement of the evening stayed with her till she found herself at home.

Dances for the present fulfilled her idea of paradise, driving away all thought, and bringing an intensity of enjoyment which was almost hysterical, and always followed by a revulsion which she had already learned to dread.

The heated rooms, the excitement of a crowd, which she felt even in the streets; dancing, which she enjoyed passionately; men's looks and words—all helped to go to her head. She could forget her unhappiness, almost forget she had any reason to be unhappy, and live eagerly in the present.

She was beginning to find herself haunted throughout by the dread of a possible revulsion of feeling to follow, but she had not yet learned to look upon it as a certain consequence.

When she found herself alone, with the noisy, lighted street shut out, and the quietness of the house round her, her heart suddenly began to sink.

It was in a sort of irrational effort to escape from what was coming that she hurried her steps, and even

began to hum to herself very softly as she went upstairs. The loneliness of it pressed upon her.

Her father was the only person who slept on the same floor as Viva; the children were all higher up. His door was shut.

Vivien's own room was really only a dressing-room belonging to the room which had been her mother's, and there was a communicating door between them, which it was still her pleasure to keep open.

Mrs. Meredyth's room was just as she had left it; Viva had silently battled for this, making it her care.

At first, when the pain was raw and fresh in her mind, it had taken her days to make up her mind to go in; on most evenings she had rushed herself into bed, looking neither to the right nor the left, for fear she should catch sight of her mother's portrait on her dressing-table.

But since a letter had come from that lost mother, it was different. Of late Vivien had established a series of queer little ceremonies which were never neglected.

It was quite late to-night when she found herself in her room, but Vivien was far too excited to feel sleepy, and nothing must be omitted.

She took off her cloak, and untwisted the soft woollen wrap round her throat, and then she went in to her mother's room with slow steps. She drew off the bed-spread, folding it neatly, and, laying it aside, she turned down the bed, and saw that her mother's slippers were ready with a strange kind of fanciful pleasure.

It was not that she had any expectation that her

mother would come, but that she liked to pretend to herself that she had.

Some evening she would make fancies to herself of what the meeting would be when it came, which surely it would some day, and playing with her feelings to the verge of endurance. She could make quite vivid pictures for herself, working herself up to a state of uncontrollable excitement.

But this evening she was in a very black mood. How was it possible that a short time ago she had felt happy? What had there been about the evening to make her enjoy it? What was there in the world that was not miserable and sinful and—lonely?

That was what it all meant; Viva was very forlorn and desolate.

She threw herself face downward against her mother's bed, drawing long breaths. It could never be the same again. Whether she ever saw her mother again or not, it would never be the same.

Vivien repeated over and over to herself, "I wish she had died instead," doubting whether she fully meant her words.

But if her mother had died, she would have been her own mother still, and now she seemed lost in a worse way. Viva had had an engrossing passion for her mother which had filled her mind, and almost driven out other feelings. With her mother everything seemed to her gone.

Viva was not given to confidences, and she had nobody to confide in. She kept a diary now for the

thoughts and plans which surged in her head, but even to her diary she gave only half confidence, though it would have taken no genius to read between the lines.

She kept a time to write in it every evening, and cherished it in a drawer safeguarded by a special Chubb lock, having extracted an oath from Milly that in the event of her sudden death it should be duly burned unread. She entered into very minute particulars with this diary, though she failed in the honesty of a Bashkirtseff, and represented herself to it occasionally rather as she would be than as she was.

It felt to her as a kind of friendly presence in the room even now, and she drew up the table that held it and took it out, with a faint feeling of comfort.

"Nobody knows or even guesses what I think or that I think at all."

She had chosen those words to begin it, and she read them with a kind of pleasure to-night.

There was a certain satisfaction in seeing her loneliness in words.

She was not inclined to write to-night; the interest of the evening seemed somehow to have faded out, and in Abram Sassoon personally she did not take much interest. She had the inclination of a very young girl to despise him as a "good young man."

So strange was her ideal of manliness that Lord Maurice seemed to fill it more nearly; perhaps it was because he never for an instant forgot or let her forget that they were man and woman. He brought an ex-

citement into her life which she had already learned to miss in the days when he was absent without attempting to analyze it.

His name came often into her diary, but for the most part in a half-slighting way and as "a boy." When they were together Vivien had a sort of instinct that of late, at least, he had the best of it, and so revenged herself. In her diary she had the best of it always, and was not distinctly conscious of misrepresenting matters.

Refusing to realize his increasing coolness, she fancied causes of offence for him which she and her diary received.

"Young Maurice is always so huffy," her entry had ended the night before. "I suppose he is again offended at something. I laughed and talked to other people, and pretended not to notice, and once when he came near I pretended not to see, and he went off offended. So between us we spoiled the evening, for he is certainly more fun than the rest."

Viva really persuaded herself that this was a true account, and that Maurice was offended and not indifferent.

She had written a long four pages yesterday evening, finding a pleasure and satisfaction in it, but to-night even that palled.

She shut up the diary, pushing it away from her impatiently, and began to move restlessly about the room. It was desperately quiet and still. There was not a sound to be heard in the house or in the street. Vivien would have given much to feel some human

presence near her. It seemed strange to her that without outward help her mood could change from extreme enjoyment to utter misery.

She could face and fight this dark cloud in the daytime in many ways. There was the strange excitement of the streets, where she could forget herself in imagining histories behind the chance faces she met; there was her violin, which always came as a comfort, or she could bury herself in a book. But even this last way of escaping from her thoughts was shut off from her at night; Viva's eyes were not strong, and suffered from being used by candlelight.

It was those books to which she had gone at first for escape that had done the mischief or had helped to do it. Had she read them without the excitement of her mother's story, and without Maurice to help to explanation, it might have been different, as Maurice without the books might have been powerless. Both together had left her in a half-aroused, half-awakened state which was inexpressibly miserable.

Vivien understood nothing clearly, and the desire to know was upon her. She had always wanted to know. As a child in her lessons she had never been content to learn by rote like the others; she had always puzzled restlessly for an explanation. In history, where there had been a human element, she had hunted motives and built up characters for herself till they felt like friends, and it was this power of hers which had made her schoolroom recitations much appreciated.

Once, when she was about eleven years old, a friend

of her mother had listened to her, and said, "That little girl would make an actress"; and Viva had thought and dreamed of this till other things had driven it out.

Of late it had been her mother and Maurice whom she had striven to understand as the two who most interested her.

She was groping for a standpoint from which to face life and distinguish right from wrong. Viva was driven hither and thither. Her father, Mrs. Fraser-Latimer, Alison, Maurice, Sassoon—all seemed to consider the world in such entirely differing lights, and which was right?

Vivien had no one to believe in. She had believed in her mother thoroughly with all her heart. With the loss of that belief came loss of belief in everything.

She felt the loneliness grow utterly unbearable. With it there came upon her the awful fear of nothingness. How much reality was there about her life and the lives of those about her?

Where had she come from and where was she going to? If death came to her, as come it would, what then?

Viva drew long, shuddering breaths, and felt her face damp with fear.

CHAPTER XI.

VIVIEN had no event of interest before Thursday. She spent as much time out of doors as was possible, finding the house very dreary, and also that to persuade Johnny to go out with her was the only way to keep him both amiable and out of mischief. He was not a bad boy by any means, but he was dull and unhappy, and wanted some help to pass the time.

The season was practically over, and town was growing empty.

Mrs. Fraser-Latimer had gone. She had called to say good-bye, and had asked Meredyth to come to her in September, and hoped he would bring Viva. But when Meredyth had refused in his sweetest manner, she had given Viva no separate invitation, though she had kissed her and patted her hand, and said how sorry she was that "Pat" was so obdurate.

Viva wondered to herself over her father's refusal, and wished she could have gone herself.

They had no other visitor of interest.

One afternoon Lady Meredyth took Viva to a match at Lord's, to which a faint possibility of Maurice lent an interest. But he was not there, and it was very dull.

Lady Meredyth, having brought her there, dropped her, and had men of her own to talk to, while Viva with her limited acquaintance saw no one she knew, and was bored and shy.

As they drove home, Lady Meredyth kindly exercised the privilege of a relation by criticising Viva's father very sharply, and giving her mother a veiled stroke or two. "Aunt Judith" was celebrated for her capability of saying nasty things in the nastiest way possible.

Of her father Vivien saw little. They seldom met, except at dinner, which was a less constrained meal now that Johnny was there to break the *tête-à-tête*.

Johnny was quite willing to talk to his father, though they had little in common, and Meredyth turned to him from Viva with relief.

Viva watched her father jealously. She would not ask, and had no means of knowing, what he did with himself all day long.

She became conscious that he was changing ever so little, but the reason eluded her. He was growing to have a new line on his forehead and an increase of expression in his light blue eyes.

Vivien set him down uncompromisingly in her mind as content to be idly effortless, and not to face his loss of money.

Two money presents from her mother tided her over any immediate pinch, and she understood too little even to wonder if her father felt it.

In truth, it had gone so far with Meredyth that he

walked many a time because he had no money to take a hansom, and that if he had failed to come home for dinner he would have been reduced to seek hospitality or to do without. These things felt to him as great hardships.

The house would cease to be theirs at the end of August, and after that there was entire vagueness about the future.

Vivien knew that their house in Lincolnshire belonged to her mother, and wondered.

Johnny took it for granted that he was going back to Haileybury, and Milly and Jossy did not speculate.

In Viva's head there was a wild, vague project of going to her mother. Nobody else in the wide world wanted her or cared what became of her.

But the project was as yet without form or definiteness. Though Evelyn had written how she longed for her, she had said no word of wishing her to come, and the girl realized obstacles.

The hope of a letter made a daily excitement. Vivien got one on Thursday which filled her mind for the whole day, driving out other thoughts.

It became a drag to get ready to go to Alison in the evening; the enthusiasm that Sassoon had awakened had proved short-lived.

Still, she made her violin ready tenderly, with the pleasure she always felt at the thought of playing.

It was by the merest chance that she met her father in the hall, and he asked her casually where she was going, driven by his occasional sense of responsibility.

She would have preferred to answer nothing, and she said, "I am going over to Alison's," in such a low tone that she had to repeat it. Like most hunting men, Meredyth was a little deaf.

He drew to a pause, and looked at her doubtfully.

"We are going down to a people's entertainment at Bailey End," said Vivien, with entire absence of invitation in her tone.

"Yes," said Meredyth, drawling out the word.

Viva waited for him to move aside, which he did after a moment's hesitation.

"You might——" he began with deliberation, but ended, "Well, it doesn't matter."

Vivien searched for a careless question to tell her when he had last seen Alison, but felt her earnestness would defeat her.

Her rearoused suspicion made her very frozen to Alison.

She found herself looking her all over critically, and deciding that no man would want to marry so decidedly elderly a woman.

Certainly her father had, in her eyes, left youth far behind him; but then it was young, fresh girls that men like that wanted to marry, she told herself, shuddering.

If Alison ever came to fill her mother's place, Viva thought to herself, "I believe I could kill her!"

There was a ghastly coarseness in the thought that her father was free to marry.

Alison was disappointed at the return of defiance

in the girl's manner, but she was glad, not only for Viva's sake, that she had come.

Though Meredyth had made no sign personally, he could not at least be direly offended unless, indeed, Viva had come in opposition, which was always quite possible.

She skirted the subject as they drove through the city.

"Viva, how are you getting on at home? Don't you give up your house soon?"

Vivien smoothed the fingers of her gloves into exact straightness, and answered "Yes" unresponsively.

"What are your father's plans for the summer? Do you know?" Alison persevered. "I was wondering if some of you would come North to me—the two little ones, for instance, if you and Johnny go to Merevale."

Vivien coloured.

"We couldn't think of troubling you," she said.

The stiffness of her tone hurt Alison sharply.

"Vivien, my dear child, you know it is no trouble. I wish you would try and like me a little better."

Any approach to sentiment made Vivien fiercely shy.

She grew crimson.

"Thank you," she said.

"And, Viva," I wish you would try to be a little softer with your father, too," Alison said, and Vivien answered sorely:

"You don't suppose that it matters to him or any

one else whether I am hard or soft! I would go away—and never see any one again—only for one thing. I intend to stay and see”—she straightened herself and looked fiercely at Alison—“that he does not dare—to marry!”

Alison turned a shocked face to her.

“My poor little Viva!” she said, but Viva shrank away. “Has this thought been worrying in your head? I don’t think it need.”

“You can never trust men,” said Vivien sententiously; and Alison could have laughed had she felt less sad. “Do you think—please, Alison, I want to know exactly what you think—that my father has any right to marry?”

Vivien wanted an answer, and she looked as if she intended to have one. The words had been very hard to say, and she might never be able to bring herself to say them again.

She fidgeted impatiently when Alison waited for a minute, not hesitating over her opinion, but over what she should say.

“It’s a mistake to worry and look ahead for troubles,” she began, “and my personal opinion can’t be of much use when so many others think differently.”

“But it is your personal opinion,” said Viva hotly, “that of all things I want to know.”

Alison’s manner was always very quiet, making a sharp contrast to the assertiveness of Vivien’s, but the slightest increase of colour showed in her pale face.

She felt herself growing unexpectedly hot at the

plainness with which the girl showed her thoughts, and was indignant with herself, asking herself if she had not passed the age for causeless blushes.

She forced herself to keep her face still steadily turned to Viva, and answered quietly:

“If you want my own private opinion, Viva, I don’t consider your father free to marry.”

“And you would not marry a man like that?”

“I hope,” said Alison, “that I should never willingly injure another woman.”

She felt that her answer was almost an avoidance of the direct question, and perhaps Viva, too, felt it so. She still searched her cousin’s face with passionately anxious eyes.

“If my father was to marry any one,” she said in a low voice, “I believe I should *kill* her—or him!”

Vivien often verged on the melodramatic, but for the moment she looked quite capable of doing as she said.

Alison wondered if it would be better to discuss the matter fully rather than leave the girl to brood over her dread in silence. But the difficulties surrounding this were innumerable.

The end of their drive came as a decision which was not unwelcome.

Without a break they could not have talked of anything else, and they both felt the difficulties of their subject.

Vivien roused herself to look out eagerly.

An open public-house shed a bright, cheerful light across the road, and with its aid she had an impression of tall houses with dark archway entrances, with a foreground of ragged children and befringed girls with towering headgear. Beyond, some dim lamps struggled with the darkness.

"Young Sassoon built the hall himself," said Alison, calling Viva's attention to the place where they had stopped.

It was not a handsome building, being largish and square and businesslike, and Vivien felt that it deserved no more than a dubious "Oh!" as she got out of the cab.

"It is a men's club, and they have Jewish meetings in it, and night schools and coffee-rooms and all sorts of odd things besides," Alison added.

Vivien followed her in, making silent observations of her own.

She had still the happy power of being able to dismiss one subject by the help of another, but Alison had to pull herself sharply together to drive the pain of the girl's words out of her mind.

They were a little late. The concert-room was already almost full, and was thick with the smoke of many pipes. Abram Sassoon met them at the platform, and took charge of Viva's violin while he found them seats.

Vivien, suddenly shy when she found how many eyes followed her, glued herself to a corner. Sassoon gave her a few words with divided attention, and then

went off to talk to friends in the crowd. Vivien, who had always been taught strict civility to lower classes, but never to look on them humanly, wondered at all he seemed to find to say. He showed quite as much interest in talking to them as he had done in talking to her some evenings ago.

Alison spoke to a few people, but Viva was disproportionately in her mind. If the child could only be interested and given something else to think about besides these twisted jealousies, which were perhaps natural enough!

She looked very pretty and very like her father as she sat, leaning forward, looking from one to another of the audience and performers a little nervously, with her fair hair rather fluffed into disorder by the hat she had just taken off. Alison felt absurdly ruffled by Sassoon's complete indifference. Of course, they were both far too young, and there were many objections; but worse things might happen.

A moment later she laughed at herself for the absurdity of her planning, realizing how fully Sassoon's head was filled with other thoughts than love or marriage.

She tried to interest Vivien in the people round, but without much success.

"Do you see the man Mr. O'Neil is speaking to? He is his particular *protégé*, and he believes his boxing matches have cured him of beating his wife. But Abram Sassoon and I have our doubts, because the wife never confesses. Last time he was taken up she came

into court with two black eyes and swore he had never touched her."

"How disgusting!" Viva said, evidently meaning it.

"And that girl in the second row with a red shawl over her head? That girl is a very clever dressmaker, and again and again she works herself up into a respectable position. But always as soon as she has anything to live upon a drunken father and brother turn up and take it from her and beat her well into the bargain."

Viva listened, but it was all too entirely outside her experience for her to listen humanly.

Alison knew she had only to touch her interest to make her capable of putting herself hotly in the place of these other women, and feeling with their lives. But the only story which seemed to rouse her was one, on which Alison touched lightly, of a poor girl who had terribly fallen and hardened not to care.

Vivien wanted her pointed out afresh, and Alison saw her eyes go to her often with a scrutiny of what might be about her outwardly different from other girls.

She found the people on the platform, on the whole, the most interesting; they struck her as particularly queer. There was a mixture of every kind and class and style of dress. Viva wondered how their costumes would have struck her father, and meditated a few details to amuse him at dinner.

Those who played in the symphony which opened

the concert were for the most part a rough assembly in working clothes, with an odd performer here and there of a different class.

There were various recitations, one or two remarkable for a lack of h's, and songs with choruses in which the audience joined.

O'Neil sang well, and Sassoon exceedingly badly, but with complete confidence, and rewarded by much applause. He brought action and emphasis into a comic song, which he shouted out cheerfully and tunelessly. Vivien would have been glad to put her fingers into her ears.

Sassoon joined in applauding her violin, which was somewhat over the heads of the audience, and which he personally did not appreciate.

He confided to her that the concertina was the only instrument with which he had ever been successful, and was not offended when she laughed.

He also pointed out to her the person Viva found the most interesting in the room. She was a red-haired young woman, amazingly clad, and Sassoon gave some amusing particulars about her.

"She's a most remarkable young person, Miss Meredyth. She has the greatest difficulty in bringing herself to speak civilly to a man, and won't accept the most ordinary politenesses. If I were to go to her now, for instance, and offer her a chair, I should get my head in my hand!"

Sassoon laughed, and found it very amusing. He was accustomed to be made more of than would have

been good for most young men by mothers with marriageable daughters and marriageable daughters themselves.

"She goes in for equality of the sexes, and has written a book that I don't suppose you ever heard of—A Death in Life," said he.

But Vivien had done more than hear of it. The book was lying on her table at home at that moment.

Her interest flew up.

Sassoon saw it, and went on lightly:

"She has a women's club with mysterious regulations, which is for the improvement—or the extermination, I am not sure which—of mankind. She speaks very seriously to all the young men she meets about their misdeeds and temptations." Sassoon began to laugh. He looked upon Miss Madeline Urquhart as a huge joke in the worst of taste; but Vivien coloured her into a heroine in a moment.

This girl did not look as if she was much older than she was herself, and yet she wrote as if she knew all about the things that puzzled Viva; she had written a book which was reviewed and talked about and called wicked, she was president of a women's club, and she lived alone in a flat.

Vivien gave her all her attention; she played for her, and watched her face to guess her judgment of the playing of others. She wanted to understand how a woman felt who had written a book like that, and Abram Sassoon's laughter did not move her.

In the course of the evening Miss Urquhart recited,

which she did remarkably well, and a few chance words when their seats happened to be together completed Viva's happiness.

She was very silent on the way home, and only spoke once of her own accord to ask where Miss Urquhart lived.

CHAPTER XII.

ALISON was speaking at a political meeting next day, and afterward Lord and Lady Meredyth took her to drive in the half-deserted row.

Lord Meredyth, who had a good deal of property in Ireland, was full of the meeting they had just left, where a point of the Irish question had been exhaustively discussed. Alison, who was generally keenly interested, and had taken upon herself a share of the business of providing Irish lady delegates for England, felt personal interests in front to-day.

She had given much thought to Vivien and Vivien's father, recognising that, as things were, direct help from her of any kind was impossible.

But it seemed to her not only possible but right that help should come from the Meredyths.

Undoubtedly Henry Meredyth was somewhat hardly placed; he was not to blame for finding himself suddenly penniless, though he might well be to blame for having been content to live upon the fortune his wife had brought him.

But he, or, in default, Johnny, stood as heir presumptive to his brother. And Lord Meredyth was a just man above all things.

She looked across into a pair of very honest eyes opposite.

Lord Meredyth wound up a statement of opinion in answer to something in her look, and then he was startled with the abruptness of her change of subject.

He listened, but he was not very encouraging.

"There's no helping Henry," he said. "One can't help a fellow who won't help himself. He may talk, but that's all he will ever do. A man of his age is hopeless."

"Jack, don't be so uncompromising," said Alison with a faint smile.

"Well, what do you think I ought to do?" he said hotly. "He's utterly incompetent and lazy. I am perfectly willing—I consider it my distinct duty—to help Johnny. But his father!——"

His contempt made Alison indignant, but she could sympathize with his point of view.

Henry Meredyth had in many ways had as good a start in life as his brother, and much less excuse for idleness, and, while he had utterly wasted his life, Lord Meredyth had used every moment.

In Henry's place, he would long ago have worked himself into a good position, and he knew it, and was not of a nature to make allowances. His was immeasurably the more admirable character.

Lord Meredyth smiled a little at the expression in her eyes.

"Alice always says that I lack charity," he said; and in answer Lady Meredyth protested: "We are hav-

ing the children to stay, and we have asked Henry, too. What more can we be expected to do? It is impossible, for instance, for me to see much of Vivien in town. Girls of that age——”

Lord Meredyth was quite unconscious of interrupting; he had been thinking over Alison's suggestion, and spoke when he found he had something to say about it.

“Don't you see what Henry would expect? Some charming post with a big salary. He has no habit of exerting himself or apportioning his day, and no ideas of his own value. Of course, if I knew of any way of helping him, I should be only too glad. But probably if I did offer him something, I should only find that I had insulted him because it wasn't good enough.”

“You make me feel frightfully impertinent,” said Alison, “the way you have taken up what I said.”

“That's nonsense,” said Meredyth, with his pleasant smile. “Of course, it's good of you, and I consider it your bounden duty to take an interest in all that concerns the family.—Don't you, Judith?”

“She certainly is kind enough to take a great interest in Pat,” said Lady Meredyth significantly; “for my part, I think the best thing he can do is to marry somebody with lots of money.”

Alison realized that Judith did not mean her words pleasantly, and was glad of Lord Meredyth's entirely literal reception of them.

As Vivien's words had done the day before, Judith's gave a shock in showing such possibilities of misinterpretation.

"Some one," said Lady Meredyth, "who would look after Vivien pretty sharply, and make her less uncouth."

"Poor Viva!"

"Poor Viva, indeed! The boldest, most ill-bred little person I know," said Judith; and if her husband had not been there, she would have added the words on her tongue, "Who is more than likely to follow in her mother's footsteps."

Alison changed the subject; she felt sure that further words would be wasted; Jack would think it over and do what he considered right.

Besides, though there were great gaps in the Row crowd, they kept on constantly meeting acquaintances belated like themselves, and any connected conversation was impossible.

Alison soon grew tired of it, and said good-bye, going to a socialist lecture and so home.

The Meredyths stayed later, both rather enjoying the unusual sensation of spending an afternoon together. As a rule, they went their entirely different ways without disagreement. People said Lord Meredyth allowed his wife far too free a hand, but perhaps he knew his own business; at any rate, he sought for no help, and, though Judith's behaviour had given rise to many gloomy prophecies, they had not been fulfilled. Not even Judith knew how much Lord Meredyth's grave blue eyes had seen, or how little.

As they drove home she plunged into a criticism of Alison Carnegie.

"I suppose you see what it all means, Jack? She intends to marry Henry if he gives her the chance."

Lord Meredyth stared at her in unmitigated astonishment.

"Great Scot! What on earth do you mean?"

"Absolutely what I say."

"But, my dear girl, you must believe Alison to be a perfect fool; even outside her ideas on divorce, which you know well enough. She has a thousand interests, and lives a very full, happy life. She has enough money, but not too much. What earthly reason could possess her to do such a crazy thing?"

Judith shook her head wisely.

"That is all very well," she said; "but when a woman comes to a certain age and isn't married——"

"You are talking of fools!" Meredyth interrupted hotly. "I think very differently of Alison."

"And then she was once engaged to Henry."

Meredyth began to laugh; he had a very pleasant laugh, which softened the slight hardness in the lines about his mouth.

"A lifetime ago!" he said. "You needn't rake up a story nearly twenty years old. No, Ju; you won't persuade me that you aren't talking nonsense. It would be a dispensation of Providence for Henry, but for her——"

Lady Meredyth was unshaken. "Well, tell me why Evelyn was always jealous of her, and why that child Vivien hates her," she said.

"Who could account for the fancies of a child and

of a woman like Evelyn?" said Meredyth lightly. "But I hope, Judith, that if either of them ever hinted such a cruel thing to you, you did not encourage it?"

He ended very gravely indeed, and Lady Meredyth had to pledge herself to many assurances.

She could see that her husband was annoyed. He had a warm friendship and respect for Alison Carnegie, though he did not approve of her way of living, and had strongly opposed it at the first.

He had the strongest objection to any life which brought a woman unprotected into knowledge and the world.

If he had had a daughter, she would have had her outgoings narrowly guarded, and Judith would have met a stern check.

But, according to her lights, which were different from his, he admired the use Alison made of her life, and he quite realized that her work filled her whole mind, and that she had never been a woman to desire marriage in the abstract.

Judith was entirely mistaken; he refused to realize that in speaking she was putting herself in Alison's place.

He thought very seriously, and without consultation with his wife, over what Alison had said to him.

Alison herself, though she was suspected of a taint of socialism, was not so successful as usual in driving every thought except what concerned her business at the time out of her mind.

When a rather prosy speaker uprose, she allowed

herself to think her own thoughts, and let his words fall on deaf ears.

Was she unreasonable in still having hopes for Meredyth, or was it because long, long ago she had known him better than any one else?

It might be that nothing was left of the boy she had known then.

Perhaps Henry was incapable now of thinking of anything beyond the cut of his clothes and the curl of his mustache. Jack seemed to think so, and young Sassoon had at once jumped to the same conclusion.

"The sort of chap who is always having his photograph taken," he had said. "I wonder you bother with him."

Meredyth and Sassoon represented different generations, different classes, very different points of view, but, Alison told herself, they resembled each other in a certain sternness of judgment.

But was any movement on her part to be put a stop to by such absurd ideas as those that seemed to have entered Vivien's head and Judith's? A woman of her age; a woman who had never shown any inclination toward marriage, and who had hoped she might now be allowed to live her life as she chose! Judith would have been nothing, but Vivien! It seemed very strange, for she felt clearly sure that such an idea had never come to Henry himself.

Alison considered her life settled and mapped out, and was very well content with it. It was full, and brought her much pleasure.

She had seldom time to feel the loneliness of it, though in her love for children she was not ignorant of a longing for a little child of her own, which she had for many years made up her mind was a precious thing she could never have.

Her life was not the ideal life she had fancied for herself, but in this she shared with her neighbours. She was content, and she knew she was not useless.

When she went home that evening, she found her work ready for her.

She had to draw out an article roughly, to be written the next morning, and she had letters to write about two of her women whom she wished to send to Australia. Then one of her matrons came to her with a question about management, and she was summoned to the laundry over some difficulty in the numbering of clothes.

There was always this difficulty of lack of honesty to meet; women like those she was trying to help would risk anything when the craving for drink came upon them.

There were constant disappointments to face; the women had not only to be kept constantly employed, but to be amused, if they were to bear the change from their old life. A restlessness came upon them all, and was the hardest thing to struggle with.

Alison had a laundry, and a room for dressmaking and millinery, and some were taught carving.

A better and entirely different class, who had never gone upon the streets or had been forced into the life and snatched eagerly at a chance of escape, she kept

apart, and drafted into service after a time or to the colonies; even marriage sometimes solved the difficulty there.

With these girls there was a hope which almost failed with the others, and less frequent disappointment.

They cheered her, and letters from them afterward helped her through times when she would have been otherwise inclined to despair, and think further effort hopeless.

She spent a short time with them after she had settled the dispute in the laundry, and then she had to go out to a meeting of shopgirls a little distance away. She had had them at first in her own rooms, but had found the knowledge that her house was a home for unfortunates made a difficulty. Sometimes when she was tired it was rather weary work to turn out again, but she had so many helpers now that the necessity only came once a week.

This evening she was glad to go—glad to realize how thoroughly her life was filled.

CHAPTER XIII.

“WELL, Johnny, are you coming or are you not?”

“No, I’m not coming; it’s not much fun spending the afternoon with a lot of women, and I hate afternoon shows at the theatre. I told you I wouldn’t go as soon as I knew Uncle Meredyth was going to take Milly and me to-morrow night.”

“Well, it’s rather horrid of you to leave me to go alone,” said Viva crossly, “when you know it is for your pleasure Alison means it, and you told her you would go. I hate that long drive by myself.”

Johnny and she were at one end of the library doing nothing, while Meredyth and Jossy were playing draughts at the other. Jossy was the one Meredyth found the most responsive of his children, and the one he liked the best.

But he looked up quickly from the board at Viva’s words, and said pleasantly:

“Shall I go, Viva, in Johnny’s place?”

Vivien was undoubtedly taken aback; she stammered over her answer.

“Oh, I was only making fun; it is just because I think it rude of Johnny when he said he would go. I don’t really mind going by myself.”

"However, I'll take Johnny's place, and do my best to fill it efficiently," said Meredyth deliberately.

"It really doesn't matter," said Vivien, flushing; "in fact, I don't think I can go this afternoon."

"Very well," said her father calmly. "I will make your apologies.—Jossy, I'm going to huff that man of yours; you must keep a sharper lookout."

Vivien felt she had not done well. If Meredyth was determined to go, it would have been better for her to go as well. But, in case he had not meant this, of which she felt uncertain, she carefully refrained from saying anything more.

She watched him suspiciously, but he took no notice and calmly finished his game with Jossy, after which he equally calmly went out of the room.

He had never troubled himself very much about Vivien's wayward moods, and of late he had begun to take them as a matter of course.

He had a few shillings in his pocket, and he took a hansom to Wall Street, without bestowing further thought on his daughter.

He had not seen Alison for almost three weeks, and had parted from her then more than coolly. Her words had hurt him very much—so much that for a short time he had intended not to see her of his own free will again, but that mood had soon passed.

He was conscious of a distinct feeling of satisfaction when he found himself in her room once more, with her friendly hand held out to him.

"Well, Alice," he said, "it's cool in here and very hot outside. I expect I am covered with dust."

She was certainly looking very well in a long, cool, gray dress, which did not make her look too tall; it flashed into Meredyth's head that she had kept her looks more entirely than any woman of her age that he knew; his sister-in-law, in spite of much aid from art, had entirely lost a certain freshness which still kept its place in Alison's face. Her complexion was as clear as it had ever been.

There was much pleasure in both her face and voice as she welcomed Meredyth.

"Have you forgiven me?" she said, with a directness which was her own. Most people, Meredyth thought to himself, would have contented themselves with ignoring that there had been cause of offence.

"I forgave you long ago," he said, "but I wasn't coming to see you after all that till I had something to tell you."

"What? Have you good news? Has Jack——"

"No, I owe nothing to Jack, thank the Lord! Aren't you going to ask me to sit down, Alice? I have reminiscences of a particularly comfortable chair."

He was in a curious mood. Alison even suspected that he was a little nervous, he took such care to make his speech deliberate and careless. He lay back in his chair, stroking his mustache, and looking at Alison after a fashion of studying her.

"Now, Alice, what would you say if I told you I had engaged to go out as hired guest at a guinea a

night? It's an easy business—you've only got to make yourself agreeable, and not to steal the spoons—and I have clothes I might as well wear out. What would you say?"

"That you were talking nonsense," said Alison. But a certain grimness about his tone made her a little anxious.

"O Henry! tell me?" she said.

Meredyth gave a short laugh.

"Well, it's not that," he said, "but it's something in the same line. I'm going to travel."

"To *travel*!"

"To travel in ale."

Meredyth had not been sitting comfortably in his chair; he got up now altogether, and went, with a man's instinct, to stand with his back to the fireless fireplace.

"The murder is out!" he said. "You see, Pimley and Co. were the only people who seemed to consider my services worth having. I know fellows in most regiments——"

"Henry! You can never do it!"

He caught her up sharply.

"Look here, I thought your theory was that no honest work was degrading. I say, Alice, won't you give me my first order? Pimley's ale I can sincerely recommend. It's a detail that I haven't tasted it, and that I'm to get a percentage on what I sell——"

"But——"

"It was this or starvation. And though I might have preferred starvation personally, Jossy is a jolly

little kid, and I'd just as soon he had something to eat. Besides, I couldn't have looked you in the face if I hadn't made some effort. Will you have any further truck with a commercial traveller?"

Alison looked at him with a sigh.

"I had hoped you would have got something better than that—something you wouldn't hate so awfully. There are Jack's agencies——"

"Confound Jack! I beg your pardon, Alice, but I have no wish to be obliged to his Excellency the Earl of Meredyth, and I just hope it will cut him! Upon my word, if I believed it would really annoy him, I wouldn't dislike it so much."

Meredyth was not speaking fast, and he pulled himself up easily when the maid came into the room with the tea-tray; neither of them spoke till they were alone again, and Alison was rather glad of a little time to think.

"There, Henry, you can put in as much cream as you like; you are too particular for me to undertake it. I don't like the way you talk, but I am sure you are right. If you can stand it."

"If you knew how hard it is to get anything, you would be sure that I'd do my best to stand it. I suppose I've about found my level, and it's a precious low one. Thanks, I'll have some bread and butter."

The depression in his tone touched Alison very much. The opening of his eyes, whether it had been partial or complete, must have caused a man like Meredyth much suffering.

He said a few minutes later, "Alice, I suppose I must chuck my clubs?" in quite a meek tone.

Alison could not help noticing the frequency with which he shortened her name this afternoon—a thing he had seldom done for years.

They seemed to be sliding into an unfamiliar position, she unwillingly, with open eyes, and he quite unconsciously.

There was a curious return of something like boyishness in his manner.

To break the silence, Alison said: "I expected Viva this afternoon. Isn't she coming?"

Meredyth shook his head.

"She's an extraordinary child. She was coming, and then she huffed over it in some way beyond my comprehension."

Alison was afraid it was not beyond hers. She said nothing.

"It is so good of you to ask the children," Meredyth said; "you are so busy, and, besides, no matter how kind people may be in the country, as a rule they don't bother about their friends in town. I am afraid Viva is an ungrateful little cat."

"I wish you would let me take her to Scotland with me next month. You know my stepfather leaves me free to do as I please about asking people. I wish you would let me have Viva."

Meredyth laughed.

"Let you! I haven't much authority with that young woman!"

“And there is something else I want to ask you about her. She asked me the other day to take her over the Home, and I put her off, as I had not your leave. But I should like to. I am sure it wouldn’t do her any harm, and it would interest her. Do you know, I should like to take her to one of the lectures a lady doctor is giving to my shopgirls; Viva is badly in want of a little plain speaking.”

Meredyth shook his head at once; he did not pretend to any knowledge of his daughter, but he had his own theories about women.

“Now, Alice, you know that is one of the things I consider worse than unnecessary.”

“And that I consider absolutely necessary for girls that have to earn their own living, for all girls before marriage, and necessary for Vivien, because she is trying to puzzle out things for herself. I am sure you have no idea, Henry, what books she reads—all these late women’s books that you and I agreed the other day ought to be put on the fire.”

“That rubbish! I don’t think such utterly false ideas of life could do a girl any harm.”

“But how is a young girl to know they are false? I know you think you know a great deal about women, Henry, but I am sure you couldn’t even guess at the muddle that poor child’s head is in and her difficulties.”

Alison pulled herself up, finding herself on the point of beginning a sentence, “If I were her mother——”

Henry said: “But do you propose to clear her mind

by introducing her to your women? Why, you will probably only make her believe that all men are brutes."

"She believes that already. Her choice of literature teaches her that. Henry, I do believe it is very important for that child to be frankly treated."

Henry had a manner of ending the discussion. He said:

"I leave it to you to do as you like. But I don't agree with you at all, and I would rather not."

He was quite sure and distinct—as distinct as his brother could have been.

Alison said she would, of course, do as he wished, believing in her own mind that he was wrong, and troubled about Vivien.

Then their talk floated back to Meredyth himself, a subject on which he had more to say.

A good many people came in, largely literary people, who found this within convenient distance of the Strand, and had much to say that interested Alison.

Her stepfather came, sharing Meredyth's position as an outsider.

He was a Mr. Hewitt Blennerhasset, a rich Australian, who, having made his money, had married Alison's mother, and taken a big place in Scotland. He was fond of Alison, but utterly unsympathetic with what he called her "fads," and she had at one time found certain coarse jokes of his very hard to bear.

But she had learned now the difficult lesson of liberality to the illiberal.

Sassoon, who had come by special invitation, with a view on Alison's part to the entertainment of Vivien Meredyth, disliked Mr. Blennerhasset strongly. Abram had a very charming manner of deference with older men, but was put to his utmost to maintain it with Mr. Blennerhasset.

He was a large, heavily built man, with an expansive waistcoat and spectacles.

For his part, he found Sassoon a great entertainment, and picked him out to greet within five minutes of his arrival.

"I remember this young man," he said in a loud, cordial voice; "this is the young man who proposes to put a stop to vice and beggary by stopping early marriages.—Have you arranged that little job yet, young man?"

"You are hardly stating that fairly, sir."

"Isn't that so? Isn't it a fact that you are going to give orders to that effect?"

Alison had serious doubts where this opening would lead the conversation to if it was left in Mr. Blennerhasset's hands. She watched for a chance of interfering.

"I don't answer for the young men, but I'll engage the pretty little devils of girls will listen to a fine-looking fellow like you, though you are a Jew," Mr. Blennerhasset interpolated, in what he fondly believed to be an aside. "Do you preach single life to them? I shouldn't mind the job myself!"

"You quite misunderstand me," said Abram Sas-

soon hotly. He was very touchy where his hobbies were concerned.

"Well, I am sure you told me all this.—Young men had a different way of getting on in our time, eh, Meredyth? Our preaching to the girls was a trifle different."

Alison flung herself into the breach. She understood Meredyth was a man to feel annoyed at being unjustly coupled in age with Mr. Blennerhasset.

"Why didn't mother come?" she said, heedless of being irrelevant.

Mr. Blennerhasset gave a jolly laugh.

"Your giddy mother is far too full of gaieties. In her time and mine people amused themselves, and didn't devote themselves like this young man to saving souls and converting sinners and teaching Sunday classes."

Sassoon flushed hotly, but, exchanging a look with Alison, he brought himself to answer good-humouredly:

"At least, I can hardly teach Sunday classes."

Meredyth, who had got up to say good-bye, said under his breath to Alison, "Do you think your father takes Pimley's ale?"

Mr. Blennerhasset shook hands with him, still with his attention centred upon Abram Sassoon, whom he imagined himself to have been lightly rallying.

"Well, upon my word, I think the best thing is to live comfortably, be kind to your neighbours, and not go out of your way to pamper paupers," he said.

Meredyth wondered over the words as he walked over to his club.

They brought Alison's life and his own into contrast. He had lived comfortably and certainly with no unkindness to others—no active unkindness, at least.

Were not Alison's life and Sassoon's and others like them, only in reality their way of finding amusement?

Then his thoughts went specially to Alison. What a sweet face she had, and what a sweet wife she would have made to some man! How was it that Alison had never been married?

The remembrance of their old engagement twenty years ago was so dim that it hardly touched his mind.

But Pimley's pale ale held the largest place in his thoughts.

CHAPTER XIV.

"You needn't wait for Vivien," said Johnny.

He had come rushing downstairs, four steps at a time, at the sound of the dinner gong, and he was hungry.

Meredyth asked him rather sharply if he never wore his tie straight, and took no notice of his remark. Indeed, he had scarcely heard it, his head was so full of Pimley and Alison.

A few minutes later Johnny, being impatient, repeated, "Father, there's no use waiting for Viva."

His father asked why.

"She hasn't come in," said Johnny.

"Not come in! Why, where is she?"

"I don't know. She went out soon after you did."

Meredyth took out his watch and looked at it. It was eight o'clock.

He put it back into his pocket so deliberately and absently that Johnny meditated another hint of dinner.

But a moment later his father said abruptly, "Then there's no use waiting."

Johnny, who had visions of a pudding—almost a plum pudding—cordially agreed with him.

He was not at all disturbed about his sister, and got bored and went to bed about half an hour before she came in.

This was after ten o'clock.

Meredyth was in the smoking-room, reading in desultory fashion, with uncomfortable reminiscences of what Alison had said to him about Viva running through his head.

Vivien came in abruptly. Her mind was still full of the past excitement and pleasure of the evening. She faced her father, prepared for defence before he spoke.

"I hear you want to see me," she said.

Meredyth rose, concealing a certain embarrassment with an affectation of extra deliberation.

"Sit down for a moment, Vivien. I merely want to ask where you have been."

"Where I have been!" said Viva, with careful astonishment.

"Not such a very unnatural question, especially when you consider that Johnny and I waited half an hour for dinner."

"I am very sorry I was not back."

There was a pause.

Meredyth smoothed his hair and looked imperturbable.

Presently he said, "Well, Vivien?"

Vivien moved uncomfortably under his steady look; beneath the shade of her broad black hat he could see the colour flush into her round cheeks, while she gath-

ered her brows into an uneasy frown. She hesitated, and with her hesitation a suspicion flashed into Meredyth's mind, bringing with it full discomfort. Was it possible that Evelyn had returned to London without his knowledge?

He repeated his question rather sharply, conscious at the same time of his utter powerlessness if Vivien refused to answer. But she was not equally conscious of it; she answered unwillingly and pettishly, like a naughty child who dares not venture on complete rebellion:

"I have been to see Miss Urquhart, if you must know," she said pertly.

Meredyth made an imperceptible movement of relief.

"Miss Urquhart, indeed?" he said politely.

Vivien drew herself up defiantly.

"And I have no doubt," she said, "that you will object to this, as to everything else."

"My dear child, if you trail your coat so incessantly, you can't expect the most peaceful person to resist it. I still keep my temper, and I assure you that for all I know Miss Urquhart may be a most estimable person, or the reverse."

"And you blame me because I am glad to escape from my miserable home, where there is nothing to do and no one to speak to, to some one who is willing to show me how to be of use in the world."

Meredyth's face was expressionless.

"I wish you would introduce me," he said. "I am

most anxious to be of use in the world—at a reasonable salary.”

Vivien surveyed him contemptuously.

“As if it was for money!” she said. “Miss Urquhart spends her time helping the thousands of miserable women who have no help, and that’s what I want to do—not to idle away my life uselessly.”

“Pooh!” said Meredyth, very distinctly.

Vivien turned on him with flashing eyes.

“It is only what I expected—only what Miss Urquhart told me I must expect. Men are all against us—against all attempts to help women. It suits you to have us at your mercy!”

Vivien was obviously quoting Miss Urquhart. Meredyth, though he did not know that lady, realized that neither the girl’s words nor manner were her own.

“That’s a nasty one for us,” he said, laughing.

“Miss Urquhart says there are not three men in London fit for a decent woman to speak to,” said Viva hotly.

Meredyth shrugged his shoulders.

“Really?” he said. “How does Miss Urquhart *know?*”

“It is easy to sit and sneer at me——”

“My dear Vivien, I hope my manners have not so far followed yours. Supposing we put off our discussion on the morality of mankind, as set forth by Miss Urquhart, whoever she may be, till to-morrow morning?”

"I have not the least wish to discuss that or anything else—*ever!*" she said passionately.

She was in no wise a match for her father. He made her feel herself uncomfortable and ridiculous, and of all things this was hardest to a girl who had not yet found her level.

She had come home excited by Miss Urquhart's words and welcome, and with her head whirling with wild ideas for the future. Now she felt herself all at once reduced to a state of paltry youthfulness and overwhelmed by the misgivings of a shy girl after impulsive action.

What had Miss Urquhart thought of her? Very possibly that she was a gushing, hysterical girl, rushing to a stranger with confidences. When Vivien considered the impulse which had driven her to Miss Urquhart, it seemed singularly insufficient.

In her room she felt the black depression which had been driven off for a time closing in on her. All her dreams of active effort grew vague and impossible.

But of one thing she felt clear—that she hated her father.

She was certainly disappointed next morning to find that he did not even allude to the evening before. She was braced for a struggle, ready to take up a position of ill-usage and to oppose herself to unreasonable commands.

She was firmly of opinion that she could not and would not yield were her father to forbid her to see Miss Urquhart again.

But Meredyth was exceedingly polite, and her prepared opposition fell rather flat.

So, as before, she went her own way.

Miss Urquhart made much of her. She spoke of her own troubles, of how she was misunderstood by others, and gained Viva's passionate gratitude by calling her her comforter, and so making her feel of importance to some one. She promised to take the girl to many strange and interesting places, and assured her she would show her how to fill her life. Most of all, she descanted on the wrongs of women and her mission to right them—a mission in which Viva should help.

Viva listened, understood something, and guessed at much, and told herself with unnecessary reiteration that she entirely admired Miss Urquhart and her freedom from conventional trammels.

Meredyth let her alone under this influence, as he had done with Mrs. Latimer, but with more qualms of conscience. When he saw his daughter he told himself he must do something—at least, find out who Miss Urquhart was, but he never got further than an intention.

He was just then very full of other matters; he relieved his mind by reflecting that interference would be useless. Vivien would not obey him. The next time he saw Alison Carnegie he would ask her advice, and see if she could tell him who Miss Urquhart was. After all—there was no knowing—this might be the kind of thing Alison would approve of for Viva. In any case, a day or two could not make much difference.

CHAPTER XV.

“WELL, if Darwin’s right, what about Adam and Eve? In any case, O’Neil, I put it to you—do you believe in Noah and Samson?”

O’Neil and Sassoon were having a busy morning in the library of Sassoon’s East End club. O’Neil was sorting the book-shelves, and laying aside those books which required stitching or covering, and during this process had somehow managed to blacken with dust not only his hands but his face.

Sassoon, with his legs on the table, lounged in a chair, tipped back to a dangerous angle, and was supposed to be adding up club accounts. By way of relaxation he was amusing himself by teasing O’Neil; this was so very easily done that he generally found the temptation irresistible.

O’Neil was irritated and very much in earnest.

“Do you mean,” he said, “do I believe in the exact, literal truth? Certainly it seems to us impossible, but then we know so little. I have heard it explained in this way: The world is not perfect, which we know without shaking our faith, so how can we expect the Bible to be perfect either?”

Sassoon whistled.

"Then, because we know there's sin in the world, we're to believe there are lies in the Bible?" he said.

O'Neil laughed constrainedly.

"Not exactly. Sassoon, dropping Judaism has made you believe in nothing."

Sassoon's handsome face flushed faintly.

"Perhaps I am more of a Jew than you think," he said.

"You may easily be that," said O'Neil sharply.

It was always O'Neil who lost his temper in their very frequent disputes. He knew himself to be thin-skinned and irritable, and conscientiously struggled to cure himself. The frequency with which he allowed himself to be put out of temper by Sassoon was a real trouble to him.

Sassoon had not the least intention of being unkind, nor any idea that he was, only he could not resist "taking a rise out of O'Neil," especially as it was so very easy to do.

The conversation dropped. Sassoon went back to his struggle with the club accounts and O'Neil to the books.

But Sassoon was in a lazy mood, and his attention wandered. He yawned, lost himself three times in the same column of figures, and began to draw caricatures of O'Neil on his blotting paper. Finally, he was rather pleased than otherwise when O'Neil, happening to look out of the window, threw down an armful of books with an exclamation of disgust, and announced that Miss Urquhart was in sight.

Sassoon got up hastily.

"Hang it!" he said; "the ubiquitous Miss Urquhart! What on earth does she want to-day? I'm sure I don't mind being made useful, but I'm not particularly keen on being kicked downstairs at the same time. O'Neil, are you aware that you look as if you had washed your face in extract of soot?"

O'Neil made a wild effort to improve matters, which turned several streaks into a smudge.

"Oh, good heavens!" he said, "is *nowhere* free from women?"

"Sit down; you'll only rush into her arms. Isn't that Miss Meredyth with her, by all that's wonderful? What the devil do 17/6 and £1 13 3¼ make, O'Neil? Quick!"

"I wish to goodness," said O'Neil, "that all women would stay up West and leave us to mind our own business!"

Sassoon laughed. He found something to laugh at in most things.

He went to the door to receive his uninvited guests very cheerfully.

"How do you do? I *was* sitting with my feet on the table and a pipe in my mouth, Miss Urquhart, and must apologize for not having the courage to receive you exactly as I would a man. But old prejudices are strong."

Miss Urquhart had very red hair and a very plain face, and wore a dress made for comfort and not elegance, and rather obviously guiltless of petticoats be-

neath. She held herself marvellously erect when she walked, and, according to Sassoon, struck the exact mean between the walk of a duck in a desperate hurry and that of a dismounted dragoon.

“Mr. Sassoon,” she said, “may I beg you not to be impertinent?”

“I’m sure to get my head in my hand whatever I say, so I may just as well be impertinent as not,” said Sassoon.—“I’m very glad to see you, Miss Meredyth. Won’t you sit down? I forget if you know Mr. O’Neil?”

O’Neil, who was and looked dreadfully afraid of Miss Urquhart, came forward to shake hands, and Miss Urquhart promptly remarked upon his grimy appearance.

Sassoon, as usual, was the one to explain.

“He has quarrelled with all his P. W.’s, so they won’t dust *my* books. Isn’t it unfair?—Miss Meredyth, P. W. is East Endian for Parish Workers—most estimable ladies who act as red rags to the clergy and keep things lively.”

“While you pause to take breath, Mr. Sassoon, let me say I have come to ask you if you will take us over Oxford House. Miss Meredyth would like to see it.”

Vivien had said nothing. She stood by the door, hesitating and a little shy, a patch of colour in the blue linen dress that matched her eyes, with her wavy, fair hair brought into sharp contrast under her black straw hat.

Sassoon thought her prettier than he had done before. He smiled to her in friendly fashion, and said he was really very sorry, but he absolutely must go up West in half an hour. "Perhaps O'Neil——"

"I'm sorry I can't," said O'Neil hastily; "I must go round to the C. O. S. about a case of mine."

"I'm sorry," said Sassoon, "but don't you know the other fellows? You'll probably find some one in. Or why not take Miss Meredyth to the People's Palace or Toynbee Hall for to-day? I'll be delighted some other time."

Miss Urquhart said, rather sharply, that she had not time to run over the East End sight-seeing, and no wish to trouble anybody, but Sassoon was not much disturbed by the sound of offence in her voice.

He had a theory that, as whatever he said or did Miss Urquhart was sure to be offended in the end, it did not matter much at what stage of the interview. The mere fact of his being a man was offensive in itself—the worst offence.

"Perhaps," he said amiably, "as you are here, Miss Meredyth might care to see the billiard and reading rooms and so on?"

"They're not much to see," said Miss Urquhart.

Sassoon looked a little hurt; then he laughed. But Viva was both embarrassed and distressed; Miss Urquhart, she thought, could not know that Sassoon had built the place himself.

She turned to him, flushing.

"Please, Mr. Sassoon, take me," she said.

Miss Urquhart seated herself resignedly, and said if Vivien really wished to go, she would wait for her.

Whereupon Sassoon very politely suggested that she might like to finish his accounts for him—Sassoon had a calm way of doing things which amused his friends, and was often useful.

He was delighted to show Viva round his club; there was nothing he liked better.

He took her through all the rooms, and explained them and his system and ideas.

Finally, he sat on the billiard table and held forth to Viva, for whom he had found a chair.

"I hope I'm not boring you," he said; "it interests me so much, you see, that I'm inclined to bore other people. And I know this is not much of a place, but I screwed every penny I could out of my guardian. Next year, when I come of age, I'm going to alter it all."

He proceeded to explain how, and pulled himself up in the middle to apologize.

"What a bore I am! But I feel somehow as if you really *were* interested. It's not like when I go up West and I'm introduced to a girl and she feels it her duty to begin to talk East End at once, though she doesn't care twopence about it. That drives me wild."

"I do care," said Viva. "Miss Urquhart has just taken me to some dreadful places——"

"Miss Urquhart! I beg your pardon for interrupting you, but Miss Urquhart is one of those people who do harm. She really knows nothing about work down

here, and just thinks it a show. I say, Miss Meredyth, can you play billiards?"

Vivien laughed, and declined to try.

Sassoon's boyishness and light-heartedness infected her, and his good-fellowship. He told Viva a great deal about what he was going to do after his eventful twenty-first birthday.

He intended to have a lot of office clerks and shopmen to stay at his place on the river, and they were to row and play cricket and have an excellent time altogether.

Didn't Miss Meredyth think it would be a good plan? That class got helped by nobody, and there were very few ways in which it could be helped.

"And when I am married," he said, "I shall have governesses and women clerks and so on as well. Do you think I could have them before?"

"I should think you could, with a chaperon," said Viva; "but wouldn't it be awkward if they all began to fall in love with each other?"

Sassoon was damped for a moment by this obvious difficulty, but he soon brightened and said he thought it might be managed.

"But it will be simpler when I am married," he added.

"When are you going to be married?" said Viva naturally.

Sassoon laughed.

"I don't know," he said; "I can't settle till I know who I am going to marry."

"Oh, is it so vague as that?" said Viva.

"It's not so very vague. You see, I won't marry any one but a Jewess, if I can get one to have me."

"But supposing," said Viva, very sensibly, "you fall in love with a Christian?"

"I won't; I've thought about it, and I am pretty sure it is the mood you happen to be in when you meet a girl, and not the girl herself that does it."

"So if you feel a susceptible mood coming on, you'll arrange to be within sight of a Jewess," said Viva, and they both laughed, being easily amused.

"Miss Urquhart doesn't believe in marriage," said Viva.

"Miss Urquhart!"

Sassoon picked the red ball out of a pocket, and began making vague shots at the other end of the table.

"Forgive me if Miss Urquhart is a friend of yours," he said, "but she's not genuine; she only wants to be talked about. If she was asked, she'd go to the altar like a lamb. I wouldn't trust her to refuse to come under the Chuppah with me."

"You don't like Miss Urquhart," said Viva.

"Indeed, I don't. I don't like to be reformed so very violently, and she doesn't think that a woman *can* insult a man. It makes me rude to talk of her, Miss Meredyth. Look here, the other day she came up to me: 'O Mr. Sassoon!' she said, 'I've just been to a synagogue, and I assure you I never laughed so much

in my life.' That was a tactful sort of thing to say, wasn't it? "

Vivien laughed in spite of herself at Sassoon's imitation of Miss Urquhart's voice and manner.

Miss Urquhart herself interrupted them. She had grown impatient, and came to carry off Viva with a scanty courteous farewell to Sassoon, who said good-bye to them both very cheerfully.

He took a tram to Aldgate, and went up West by underground. Six months ago it would not have occurred to him to do anything but take a hansom.

He did not waste much thought on Viva on the way. He said to himself that she was a nice girl, and that it was extraordinary that her people let her go about with a woman like Miss Urquhart, who was not even a lady. Then he forgot all about her.

He had so many keen interests in life: there was his work in the East End and his projects for the Jews—to these things and to the writing of his novel he had chiefly devoted the last six months of his life.

But Sassoon thought nothing of spending half the day down East, and the other half at a cricket match or a dance; he was desperately full of energy.

More people than O'Neil found him trying. He was hot for new projects, and could not endure to put up with makeshifts or imperfections. When he saw something wrong, he had no patience to wait or temporize, but insisted on dashing straight at a cure; neither did he bear well with the occasional stupidities and half-heartedness he met with among fellow-workers.

He would have liked to proceed on a system of summary dismissal of help, tempered with any imperfections. Consequently, though he could and did work well, he could not make others work, and often did as much harm as good.

Probably his position had taught him to be imperious.

His guardians had allowed him to do much as he liked, and he had always been exceedingly independent and accustomed to be made of importance. Also, he had never in his life felt the want of money, and in all probability never would.

With it all, with his imperiousness and obstinacy and frankly good opinion of himself, everybody liked Sassoon—even O'Neil, in whose parish he worked and made himself occasionally very troublesome.

CHAPTER XVI.

MEREDYTH had the pleasure of meeting Miss Urquhart in the course of the week.

He went to the drawing-room one afternoon and found her there, engrossed in conversation with Maurice, who had been captured somewhere, and was having a heavy time of it.

Miss Urquhart was short and angular and amazingly attired.

She made a point of dressing with what she called simplicity, and always drew her thin red hair tightly back into a little knob which was not becoming to a naturally plain face.

Meredyth had his attention drawn to her at once, and studied her old-fashioned covert coat and dingy green skirt from his seat, entranced in an effort to ascertain whether or not a suspicion of elastic-sided boots was founded on fact.

There were several other people in the room, but none of them interested him in the slightest degree. He drank tea, and talked languidly about dances and theatres to a girl who was vague to him.

Viva, on her part, made little concealment of the fact that she was not interested in what she was saying; her eyes went constantly to Maurice.

This young man had turned to Miss Urquhart in preference to the discomfort of his relations with Viva, and had since repented.

He sat on the edge of his chair, and looked shy and very much frightened.

Miss Urquhart spoke with much energy and a certain amount of gesticulation.

"You have never thought seriously of such things? I dare say not, but there is your blame. It drives me *mad* to think of that excuse put forward as sufficient."

"I dare say—I expect you're right," said Maurice, in evident alarm.

Miss Urquhart leaned forward and spoke impressively, marking her words with one hand on the other.

"Lord Maurice," she said, "it is adding insult to injury to say you have never thought. Do you know that at this moment in London there are thousands of outcast women, thousands of illegitimate children, ruined before they are born, and *you* are responsible for them all?"

Maurice, crimson, stared at her blankly.

"Oh, I *say*!" he protested helplessly.

"You, and such as you! You think because you have a handle to your name——"

"I assure you, I don't."

"You think because you have a handle to your name," Miss Urquhart repeated ruthlessly, "that you are free to act as you please—to outrage all laws, physical and moral——"

"I think nothing of the kind," said Maurice, with

signs of sulkiness. "I do well enough, and it's not a *disgrace* that I know of. I must *live*, I suppose."

Here Meredyth, greatly to his disappointment, lost the thread, in consequence of having to speed the vague young woman and her family on their way.

When he came upstairs again he went to Maurice's rescue, and turned him over, too crushed for any effort of his own, to Viva's care.

Then he drew up a chair beside Miss Urquhart with his sweetest smile and air of completest simplicity.

"You've rather settled *him*," he began.

"I consider it," said Miss Urquhart solemnly, "my duty to speak to young men to whom no one speaks. I should not easily forgive myself if I neglected it, and I am prepared for any suffering or rudeness which it may bring upon me. As the world is at present, when a woman tries to meet men on their own ground, she must be prepared for rudeness."

"As it is, you know, you must admit that *some* women can give men points as to rudeness," said Meredyth confidentially.

"I don't admit anything of the kind," said Miss Urquhart with some asperity.

"Perhaps you are right. You won't mind my saying that it's a well-known fact that men can do everything better—even dress, if they put their minds to it.

"Because we have never had a chance. Wait a few years. Women have got tired of working for bed and board, with the perquisite of a few children thrown

in. It is men's turn now. We are going to make a *complete* change."

"Won't there be—some difficulty—in making the change *complete*?" said Meredyth delicately.

"Certainly not," said Miss Urquhart with decision.

At the other side of the room Viva, half blind with a bad headache, was trying to talk to Maurice, who was not seconding her efforts.

He was anxious to go, but he was waiting for Miss Urquhart to precede him, in the fear that otherwise she might in some wise seize upon him.

Meredyth, on the contrary, enjoyed himself. He brought his most suave manner to bear, and encouraged Miss Urquhart to talk, parting with her in the end quite regretfully.

Later he contented himself with a few careless words to Viva. "You won't see that young Maurice back in a hurry. He's under the impression that you've introduced him to a raving lunatic."

Vivien had her own misgivings. She turned a flushed face on her father.

"Of course," she said, "you are against her because she is my intimate friend."

"On the contrary, I assure you she amused me immensely. But in the matter of intimate friends, I would personally prefer you to choose a lady."

"You say she is not a lady because she wears shabby clothes," said Viva hotly. "Miss Urquhart does not care about clothes—she is content to dress so as not to be remarkable."

"I am glad you told me that," said Meredyth. "I should never have guessed that was her object. All the same, I don't fancy her father was absolutely a prince. Why, Vivien, how ill you look!" he ended, suddenly struck by his daughter's flushed face and the heavy lines under her eyes.

"It doesn't matter," said Viva sorely; "it is only that I have a sore throat and my head aches."

Meredyth felt himself encouraged to no further inquiries. He followed Vivien from the room with a rather troubled glance, and then Jossy appeared and pounced upon him for chess.

Meredyth was just now rather hard put to it to dispose of his time; he was thrown off his usual lines and his usual ways of disposing of his days. He was also beginning to realize how wonderfully quickly and easily a man could drop out of the society in which his life had been spent.

But, most of all, he had been unsettled by the new world which had of late opened to him of people with absolutely different views of life, living differently, with different measurements of all things.

He, like Vivien, was conscious of having somewhat lost his bearings.

And his first expedition in the interests of Pimley's ale was only two days in the future.

CHAPTER XVII.

VIVIEN dragged herself about all the next day, sick and miserable. Even out of her violin she could get no comfort, and her head ached so that she could not read. She spent most of the day huddled on the sofa, and went to bed with a mustard plaster on her throat and brown paper steeped in vinegar on her head.

The next morning, when Meredyth was in the smoking-room, having a final pipe to brace him up for his much-dreaded expedition, Vivien put in her head at the door.

"Father," she said, "I came to tell you that the doctor has just been, and that he says I have got scarlet fever."

Vivien spoke with a certain sense of importance, and was rather gratified by her father's prompt dismay.

"Good heavens!" he said; "what is to be done?"

"I won't come in," said Viva, "as I don't want to infect the room. The maids are taking up carpets and so on in my room. Will you wire to Aunt Judith? She was coming this morning to say good-bye before they start for Merevale, and I know she is terrified at the idea of infection."

Meredyth sat and considered, smoothing his hair by instinct, and looking somewhat distracted.

"What on earth is to be done? Are you certain the doctor made no mistake? I wish I had seen him. We ought to leave this house at the end of the month; and, besides that, there's Johnny's going to school. It will upset everything."

"I am very sorry, but I can't help it."

Viva's face hardened; she told herself that he did not think of her, only of the inconvenience and of his fear of infection for himself. In this, at least, she did her father injustice; Meredyth, like most men, did fear infection, but at present he was only thinking of it as connected with Pimley's ale.

"The doctor is going to send a nurse," said Vivien stiffly.

"But is it really scarlet fever?" said Meredyth. "I can scarcely believe it, with you standing there talking to me."

"I feel bad enough."

Meredyth went into a brown study.

"Look here, Vivien," he said at last, "I am very sorry, but I must go at once, as I've got to go down to Windsor."

The two seemed bound to misunderstand one another. Meredyth was so little given to speech with his daughter that it did not occur to him to explain, and Vivien told herself sorely that he could not forget his amusement for a moment, even though she might perhaps be going to die.

"I shall be away all day," said Meredyth, "and the best thing I can think of is to put Johnny in a hansom and send him to Alison Carnegie. I'll give him a note for her. She may be able to suggest what to do with the children—or something."

Vivien's cheeks were flushed already; they suddenly flamed into vivid scarlet.

"Never!" she said excitedly. "I will never allow that!"

Meredyth opened his light blue eyes very wide and stared at her. "Why in the world not? I should think you would be very glad to have Alison to help."

"I would rather go out and die in the streets—and I will first!" said Viva passionately.

"You are a most ungrateful girl!" said Meredyth in a hard, angry voice; "you are giving way to an absurd childish prejudice."

"I am not such a child as you imagine—nor so blind!"

Meredyth rose, took his pipe out of his mouth, and began to knock the ashes into a brass tray.

"My dear, you are feverish," he said; "go up to bed and send Johnny to me at once. I haven't a minute."

"Oh, how can you!"

"What under the sun do you mean? Once for all, Vivien, what is the sense of the way you behave to Alison?"

Vivien suddenly burst into tears.

"Oh," she said, "I can't bear it! Do you think I

don't know that you want to marry Alison? Oh, what shall I do, what shall I do?"

Meredyth's pipe slipped through his fingers and dropped on the carpet. He stood, absolutely silent, and stared at Vivien, who sobbed and dried her eyes disconsolately with her handkerchief, considerably alarmed as to the effect of her words.

Presently he walked over to the fireplace and began absently to tear up paper spills into minute pieces.

Vivien watched him nervously. She was ill, miserable, and frightened—a woman always *is* frightened when she finds a particularly audacious speech received in silence by a man.

Meredyth's face was rather white, but was otherwise carefully expressionless. Vivien felt the pause endless before he spoke.

He rang the bell and moved toward her, stooping to pick up his pipe, and speaking in rather a constrained voice.

"I beg, Vivien, that you will never say anything of the kind again. You must be aware that you are talking the most unfounded, malicious nonsense. Let this end it. I must go now, and I don't quite know at what time I shall get back. I suppose a nurse will be here to look after you, and—— Spenser," Meredyth interrupted himself as the door opened, "please call a hansom and send Master Johnny here at once."

Vivien gave her father one passionate, troubled look, and turned away. Meredyth took no notice; he saw no sense in being turned from his purpose. Opposition

generally drove him into a stubborn following of his own way, and in this case he could see nothing else to do.

He had forgotten all about sending a wire to Lady Meredyth, and in the hall he was again delayed by meeting her. When she saw him she retreated toward the door with a rustle of silk petticoats and a little cry.

"Don't come near me, Pat, on any consideration. I have just heard that awful child has got scarlet fever. For goodness' sake, keep your side of the hall!"

"All right," said Meredyth indifferently; "I suppose I needn't try to be hospitable? You won't come any farther?"

"Indeed, I won't—not for worlds untold!"

"I can't afford to offer you any inducement. I am not so disappointed as I might be if I wasn't obliged to go out.—Spenser, bring her ladyship a chair, and you needn't wait."

Meredyth was quite aware that his sister-in-law was incapable of getting herself away without innumerable preliminaries, and he was secretly not very sorry to put off Windsor for a little longer.

"I am not going to stay an instant," said Lady Meredyth, accepting a chair at the extreme end of the hall. "What are you going to do? It's the most dreadful thing! And all the other children! I would offer to take them with pleasure, but it's impossible; there are a lot of people coming to me that I can't put off. And, besides, the children are all sure to have it."

"You are most kind," said Meredyth sweetly.

"But how you stand the life you are leading I don't know. Henry, you are wasted—thrown away—as a pauper."

"Upon my word, you're quite right."

"And with such a perfectly obvious way out of it."

"There's only one obvious way that I can see," said Meredyth, "and I can't say that I entirely like to risk it."

"Risk it!" said Lady Meredyth; "it seems to me it has pretty substantial advantages."

"It certainly has. But perhaps we aren't thinking of the same thing? My idea was to hire assassins for Jack. But if you have thought of anything better, I don't mind giving that up in the slightest."

Meredyth was talking nonsense without attending to what he was saying; he generally did when he talked to his sister-in-law at all.

"Pooh! rubbish!" said Lady Meredyth. "Of course, what I mean is, why don't you marry Alison Carnegie?"

It was the second time in half an hour that this suggestion had been made to him—that he had been made to realize himself a free man.

"I assure you *she* is willing enough," said Lady Meredyth.

"You flatter me," said Meredyth stiffly; "but if the joke were not so utterly far-fetched, I should be obliged to say that you insult *her*."

"There's no joke about it——" Lady Meredyth began.

"We'll call it a joke," said Meredyth imperturbably. "And now, Judith, sorry as I am to leave you, I must positively be off. A pauper can't afford to keep a hansom waiting."

He smiled, rather grimly; he had not liked to be called a pauper.

Once in the hansom, he leaned back, after a glance in the little looking-glass to see that all was right with him, and found his expedition was not first in his thoughts.

"Why didn't he marry Alison Carnegie?"

Marry her.

Until then Meredyth had not definitely realized that he was a man free to marry. The children and Evelyn's letters had seemed to keep his bonds so whole.

Now his eyes were opened.

But the idea of marrying Alison Carnegie was absurd; she was the last woman in the world he would think of—and yet, was she?

Suddenly, to his complete amazement, Meredyth found himself colouring like a girl.

He congratulated himself that Judith was not there to imagine confirmation of her ridiculous fancies—and Viva, too.

But if things had been different? Meredyth's thoughts built up an ideal life till the hansom stopped at Paddington, and he remembered his errand.

Once or twice on the way down to Windsor he caught himself smiling, and found his thoughts had again wandered beyond his control.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ALISON was writing. She turned to greet Meredith, holding out her hand without getting up.

It seemed to him that he saw for the first time her pleasant face with its steady brown eyes, her graceful figure, and her long, white hands—all things he admired in a woman.

He became all at once aware of a strange, sudden embarrassment, and to hide it elaborated his usual manner of deliberation.

But for the first few moments he spoke with his attention half distracted from what he was saying.

And yet yesterday's failure had meant a good deal to him, and he had been wondering before he came in what words he should put it to Alison.

Now that he was with her he began to tell her, with Judith's and Viva's words fresher in his mind than anything else. It was only the slightest possible sketch that he gave her, passing over by instinct all he had found unpleasant.

"I tell you, Alice, I walked up and down till I saw a policeman eyeing me suspiciously before I plucked up courage to go in. Half-way across the square I met Farran—Bobby Farran——"

He paused, but Alison said nothing. She was beginning to be aware that his eyes sought hers with a curious persistency.

“He took me into the anteroom—there were a lot of them there—and offered me a whisky and soda. But I was determined to do the thing in style, and I asked for a glass of ale instead. It was pretty hot, and I could see they were rather surprised. However, I drank it—I loathe ale—and they talked of one thing or another, and Heaven only knows what I said, for all the time I was trying to ask carelessly whose ale they took.”

Meredyth laughed, carrying off a certain discomfort.

“Of course I got it out in the most awkward way possible in the end, and then I wasn’t much ‘forrader.’ I ask you, Alice, how was I to tell them their ale wasn’t good enough and they had better get Pimley’s? All very well in theory, but when it comes to the point——”

Meredyth leaned back in his chair, and there was such a long pause that Alison broke it at last by a questioning “Well?”

“Well?” said Meredyth languidly, “that’s the whole of it. I’m not fated to sell Pimley’s ale; I can’t do it.”

Alison was not much surprised; she had scarcely expected that his new line of life would prove successful or even possible, and she guessed that she had not heard the whole story and that he had not been quite so easily beaten as he gave her reason to think.

He was the last man in the world for a life which

laid him open to possible humiliation. A less self-conscious man might have found it bearable, but he, never.

"So we are at a deadlock again," he said, and after a pause he added: "Alice, you ought always to wear that dull blue; it suits you."

Alison laughed a little uneasily and tried to turn back the conversation; when this failed she spoke of Vivien and scarlet fever.

"You got my note last night? I hope you don't think my advice brutal, but infection makes scarlet fever such a business, and then you are complicated by having to leave the house at the end of the month, and by Johnny. A private ward is quite comfortable."

"I don't like it," said Meredyth.

"But don't you think it's the best thing to do? You see there's the risk of infection for the other children. I *can't* ask you to send them here because of my women. And then there's the expense to consider."

Alison ended with a slight hesitation.

"I will do," said Meredyth softly, "whatever you think best, Alice. I wish I had always."

Alison was startled, more by his tone than his words. She said, trying to shake off an abrupt sense of discomfort: "You're getting very polite to me in my old age, Henry."

Meredyth made no answer; he sat meditatively.

Alison, after a moment, said:

"Henry, are you aware that it is nearly twelve o'clock, and I've a sheaf of proofs to correct before lunch? I *must* send you off."

He rose at once with a few words of apology.

"It's good of you to bother with me," he said; "very. Don't give me up as hopeless till I've had another shot, Alice."

But at the door he paused to suggest, with some hesitation, that they might take Johnny and go to the Garrick some evening.

The inconsistency was very characteristic, but the idea of going to the theatre was not, and Alison said so, rather gravely. Meredyth in return took some trouble to explain with elaboration that there was nothing going on now and no self-respecting person left in town, so they might just as well go as not.

Alison said they could think about it some other time, but just now he had better go and see the doctor about Viva, and he meekly went.

His own house was very dreary. On the landing outside Viva's room and his own the carpet was taken up, and from her door a damp sheet hung reeking of carbolic.

A first complaint of the nurse met him on the stairs from Viva's maid, and two of the other servants, knowing they must leave at the end of the month, came to him with a request to go at once; otherwise, they said, they would lose their next places, as no one would take them direct from a house with scarlet fever in it. This seemed reasonable.

Meredyth said they must wait for an hour or two and he would think about it, and finding Johnny and Milly lounging disconsolately about the house,

he sent them off to the doctor with a note asking him to call.

Then he went into the smoking-room and tried to pass the time with a pipe and a paper.

But his attention wandered woefully; halfway down a leading article he lost his place and discovered that the sense of what he was reading had not reached his brain.

The power of putting troublesome thoughts out of his head, which had brought him comfortably through life, seemed to have deserted him.

Meredyth had always avoided a disagreeable thing when he could, and when he could not he had forgotten it as soon as possible. He had unconsciously grown into a habit of selfishness in which nothing keenly touched him except as it affected himself. There had been no one else for him to be concerned about. Evelyn had taken her own way and led her own life, neither expecting nor giving sympathy; and she had been fiercely jealous of any advances to the children.

The men about town he met daily were spending time largely as he did, and probably with more reason for self-reproach. Meredyth was a fastidious man and was not naturally passionate; his manner of living compared most favourably with that of his usual associates. And his life had been so full of petty occupations and amusements that he had never had time to think.

Now time to think was forced upon him and there were the children to think for.

He could see no way out of his difficulties. He was

not seriously in debt, except in so far as any debt there is no prospect of paying is serious, but he was no longer a very young man and he had four children—besides, there was Evelyn.

It was impossible that any one should want to marry him, or that he should ask any one to marry him; he had no right, no possible right to do so.

But what a very comfortable difference Alison's presence would make, and what a wonderfully attractive woman she was still! How had he failed to realize it before?

Meredyth was dimly conscious of a possibility opening before him which, if he did not put it aside, but instead accepted it and took the risk, would end for ever his easy life and might bring him nothing but pain.

Would it not be better, safer, easier, to shut his eyes?

CHAPTER XIX.

VIVIEN was moved into a private room in the hospital a few hours later. She made neither remark nor objection when she read the note her father sent up to her, and submitted to all the nurse's arrangements silently. It was Alison again, she told herself. Alison's influence upon her father had been used to make him only anxious to get rid of her. She was to be sent to hospital, and then she would be no further trouble nor inconvenience, and there she might live or die as it happened—nobody cared.

And she was leaving behind all her mother's things to be thrown away or sold, or given to Alison.

Vivien in hospital would not be able to prevent it, and she could not take anything with her because anything she touched would be infectious and must be burned.

She watched her opportunity when the nurse had left the room, and crept out of bed and to her mother's room to secure at least her diary. Perhaps she could later on disinfect it; if not, better it should be burned than left where any one could read it.

For Vivien herself would never come back to that house or that room in which she had spent so much of

her life. She felt passionately troubled that she could say good-bye to nothing.

At the last she kept a stern command over herself, allowing herself to look neither to the right nor to the left on the things she was seeing for the last time. If her father and Alison Carnegie had broken her heart, at least they should not have the satisfaction of knowing it.

When she found herself in her hospital room she lay with her face turned to the wall, sullenly submitting to be roused at short intervals for medicine and milk and soda.

Well, she was out of the way now; her father need not feel that he was watched.

Perhaps when she got well again it would be to hear that her father and Alison were married—to have Alison presented to her as *her mother*.

Never would she consent to live with her—never; she would always be loyal. But it was maddening to be helplessly fastened there, knowing nothing of what might be going on.

And Lord Maurice.

When she came out he would have forgotten her, and Miss Urquhart would have found some one else to help her; there would be no place left for her, and no one who wanted her.

Vivien lay with her face to the wall, letting slow tears follow each other down her cheeks, and full of self-pity. It was very, very hard to bear.

Toward the evening the increasing pain in her

throat began to confuse her thoughts. She could no longer take either milk or medicine, and so lay undisturbed, drawing every breath with sharp agony.

People did sometimes die of scarlet fever.

Vivien's vivid imagination found an odd kind of pleasure in picturing a deathbed scene.

Her father would come and would be sorry for his neglect of her, and with her last breath she would ask him for a promise—not to marry Alison.

When she was quite sure she was going to die she would send for Maurice, and he could not refuse to come.

He would come in, hesitating and shy—Viva knew exactly how he looked when he was shy—and she would call him to her bedside, and stretch out a thin hand, and in her weak voice would speak to him, advising him, counselling him, as Miss Urquhart said young men needed counsel. A dying woman, she would tell him with a faint smile, had privileges.

And as he turned away, touched and softened, her mother would come.

In the midst of her sentimentality Viva's expression changed, and a look that was almost joy flashed into her eyes as she saw her mother bending over her.

"Oh," she thought, "if my mother was there I *could* not die!"

She drew a great quivering breath full of longing, and with the agony it gave her she almost screamed.

Then she remembered the infection; none of those

people would come to her bedside, let her live or die. If she died, it would be alone with the nurse.

As night grew to morning she lay sleepless, with the pain of her throat and head so intense as to dwarf all troubles that were not physical. Alison, her mother, Maurice—everything was blotted out in a prayer for relief.

She lay with her fair hair tossed over the pillow, her face flushed with fever, and her whole mind concentrated on the effort to draw her breath carefully.

In the morning the doctor came and said her throat was a bad one; he took her temperature and felt her pulse, and told her she was having a sharp attack. But he did not seem to think there was any danger of her dying.

He sent her ice for her throat during the morning and a sleeping draught at the end of the long, vague day, in which nothing was clear but pain.

It was Viva's worst day. By the end of the week she was better, and a time began of weariness and beef-tea and milk and biscuits.

She found the days endless. Her eyes were naturally weak, and her illness had affected them so that she could not read, and when the nurse volunteered to read to her, her cockney pronunciation proved maddening. Driven to despair, she would have worked or knitted had it not been for the infection; as she got better she would have given worlds for her fiddle.

She spent most of her time tossing restlessly about and trying not to think.

Once she had a relapse, owing to over-indulgence in a feast consisting of a slice of fish and a biscuit.

The days were only marked by the frequency with which she had something to take.

Several times Alison wrote to her, and so did Meredyth and the children; they sent her books and flowers, and later on fruit.

But it seemed to Vivien their letters only increased her loneliness; they made her feel that the world was going on for other people though it had stopped so entirely for her.

Nobody missed her, nobody wanted her.

The loneliness weighed her down and conquered all her efforts to fight against it.

CHAPTER XX.

“OH,” said Meredyth in a tone of distant disappointment, “are you going out?”

The question was rather superfluous; Alison was coming down the steps of her house, and Meredyth, rounding a corner with his usual deliberation, found himself face to face with her.

It was a regular close, glaring London day, and Meredyth's correct tall hat and frock coat looked very hot and unsuitable. Alison, in her cool summer dress, had a woman's advantage over him.

She stopped and stood hesitating for a moment.

“I was going out,” she said, “and perhaps, if you don't mind, Henry, I had better go on.”

“But I do mind. Considering the energy I have expended in getting to this God-forsaken spot, it's rather heartless of you coolly to propose to send me back again.”

Meredyth, as usual, now wanted to see Alison much more than he had done before.

“If you have anything particular to say——” she began.

“I have, Alice; most particular.”

“Well, then, come in,” said Alison, turning back.

But once in the house, Meredyth did not seem in any hurry to speak.

Alison laid down her sunshade and began to draw off one of her gloves; after a moment she changed her mind and drew it on again, as a hint that she had not come back for long.

"Well, Henry?" she said, "don't think me rude, but I can't stay long."

"And, after all," said Meredyth, "what I wanted to tell you only concerns me, and you must be about sick of my concerns."

"Nothing that concerns you—or Jack—can possibly be uninteresting to me," said Alison; then, conscious of her faint hesitation after Henry's name, she added quietly, "perhaps you, even more than Jack."

She had spoken quite easily, telling herself that any embarrassment in a friendship between a woman of her age and a man of Meredyth's, who had known each other all their lives, would be absurd, and she was dismayed to find herself unexpectedly colouring under the look which was his only answer.

"I've had a letter from Jack," said Meredyth suddenly; "that's what I came to tell you. He's made me an offer—a sort of offer."

"I am very glad."

"Wait till you hear what it is. You know about the hotel he's started on his Irish property with the idea of working up the country?"

Alison nodded.

"Well, you may or may not know he's got a big

farm within a few miles; he breeds horses and everything else, and has farming lectures and a county farming society. He works on the lines of the agricultural society and has great ideas about improving the breeds of animals through the county. At the same time he wants to make it pay—trust Jack for that.”

“And why not?”

“Now I come to the point. He wants me to live in the hotel and act as general superintendent, and especially as organizer of all picnics and amusements—picnics, Alice, pity me! In the winter and at the dead season, and whenever I have time, in fact, I’m to oversee the farm and keep it up to the mark. For this he offers me four hundred pounds a year to begin with.”

Alison turned a face of consideration to him.

“You would like it?” she said.

“I don’t know. Can you imagine me in Ireland—do the natives wear clothes or skins there? But the point is, is he offering me charity? Can I be worth the munificent salary he offers?”

“I should fancy you could easily be worth more,” said Alison. “You know about horses, and a trustworthy person on the spot is a great thing.”

“Well, Alice, shall I take it?” said Meredyth in a low voice.

“How can I decide that for you?”

“I wish you to decide.”

Alison was quite sure now, as she had been for some time almost sure, that the change in Meredyth was not only in her imagination.

She had heard rumours of rumours from more sources than one, and knew that other people besides herself had found something to notice.

It was this that brought her to face it a little later on when Meredyth, rising to go, asked if he should find her at home the next day.

"Henry," she said, "I don't see the use of beating about the bush between such old friends as we are, so I'll tell you plainly I would rather you didn't come."

"There's nothing like plain speaking," said Meredyth with sudden stiffness.

"One might naturally think," Alison went on, colouring faintly, "that at my age and under the special circumstances we might be friends if we chose. But it isn't so. You'll laugh at the idea of people talking about a middle-aged, settled-down person like myself; but though it's ridiculous I don't choose that they should talk."

Meredyth did not look as if he wanted to laugh, neither did he look surprised.

He considered Alison very gravely in a silence which covered a certain gratification.

Then he turned a little from her, took up a bowl of roses from the table, and began carefully to pull leaves off one flower after another.

"And so," said Alison, "don't be offended, Henry, if I ask you not to come so often."

Meredyth made no answer. Presently he said with a short laugh:

"Of course it's absurd. A fellow without anything,

and—and particularly a man divorced from his wife, is surely hopelessly out of the running.”

“Surely,” said Alison steadily; “and at our age people can be friends without the remotest danger of their falling in love.”

“But I suppose,” said Meredyth, “sometimes they may find out they have been in love all their lives—or one of them has—without knowing it.”

He was not quite sure how much he meant of what he was saying, but the temptation, so to speak, was upon him.

“I suppose, Alice,” he said, “you think a man who has divorced his wife ought never to marry?”

A memory of Vivien’s anxious little face when she had asked the same question flashed into Alison’s head. Now it came from Meredyth, as his daughter had feared it would come.

Alison could not find an answer. She tried for one in which, without sternly generalizing, she could make clear her personal distaste. The knowledge that Meredyth would misconstrue her silence made her still more anxious.

“I suppose,” he said in a careless voice, “that you, for instance, wouldn’t marry a divorced man?”

He asked the question with an air of indifference so elaborate as to defeat itself. He was not quite sure that he cared what answer Alison might give; he certainly was not going to let her imagine that he cared.

But he had grown curious as to her attitude toward him. So he pulled a rose to pieces and asked her the

question, following it by a quick furtive glance at her face.

"No," said Alison, "I don't think I would. Nor, for that matter, any other man."

She laughed uncertainly.

"And I daresay you don't think I would be a very successful sort of fellow to marry?"

"I don't think you would."

"And yet," said Meredyth, "once we were very near being married."

He knew that his speech was unfair; he spoke, urged by hurt vanity at her answer.

It was the first time for many and many a long year that any one had alluded to that broken engagement, and he saw a quick pain in Alison's eyes with a certain inexcusable satisfaction.

"That was a lifetime ago," said Alison. "I dare say I was very different then, and I know you were—very, very different."

Meredyth coloured, and answered very shortly.

"So, on the whole," he said, "it's just as well that I don't want to be married."

Then he got up and said good-bye, indignant with himself and with Alison.

"It only proves what an utter fool Judith is," he told himself; and added viciously: "Changed—I should think she *has* changed!—and not for the better."

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

“MAY I ask, Meredyth, if you are going to adopt Vivien as well as Johnny?”

Lady Meredyth spoke in a low voice, with a glance at Vivien, who was sitting in a low window seat at the other end of the room with her violin. She had been playing for some of her aunt's afternoon visitors, and she was still a little flushed with the excitement and pleasure her playing always brought her. She bent her pretty, fair head over the violin, and sometimes drew her bow softly across the strings.

Lord Meredyth roused himself from his paper with a start.

“My dear Judith, who said anything about adopting? With Johnny I have duties. I am very anxious that he should grow up to take an interest in Merevale.”

“Johnny is conceded. But Vivien! It was all very well at Merevale, but now in town, with Henry gone off to play the giddy goat in Ireland instead of marrying Alison Carnegie like a sensible man——”

Meredyth said “What nonsense!” rather loudly,

but Vivien had begun to play to herself and covered his voice.

“Oh, I know you can be as blind as a bat when you choose, my dear. But everybody knows he has only to give a hint, or take one. However, he prefers to live on charity.”

Lord Meredyth made an impatient movement.

“There’s no question of charity. If Henry had not gone to Ireland I should have had to send somebody else.”

“All the same you have done very well for a good many years without anybody.”

“It’s just because I haven’t done as well as I wish that I am making a change. There’s not much point in discussing what’s done, is there?”

Meredyth spoke decidedly, with a certain mixture of annoyance and amusement in his voice, and his wife understood him better than to pursue the subject.

After a short pause she returned to the part of the subject which really interested her.

“But Vivien. If I am to take her to a Drawing-room she will want dresses and so on. She’s not a girl who gets on well. If that young Sassoon is really going to marry her it’s all very well. But I am afraid his head is too full of socialistic rubbish; he’d rather marry his washerwoman’s daughter or one of his match girls.”

“He and Viva seemed to get on uncommonly well at Merevale.”

“Well, if he means to marry her I wish he would hurry up. He is a much better match than she has any

right to expect. Only an oddity would marry a girl without a penny and with no particular attractions. But he talks to her about the East End and—Lord help us!—the return of the Jews! In the meantime I am about tired of Vivien—underhand little monkey!”

“But is she underhand?”

“It’s quite obvious how little you have to do with her. Why, she does nothing openly—nothing. I do think it’s a little too much that we should have to take the whole family on our shoulders!”

Lord Meredyth laid down his paper and looked at her gravely.

“Judith,” he said, “there’s this we must consider: My life is all there is between Henry and everything he wants.”

“Jack!”

“We must realize that; you may be sure that he does.”

“But your life is a better one than his,” said Lady Meredyth quickly.

“I think it is. I think it is unlikely that he will ever succeed. But we must consider the possibility. There, Judith, we’ll say no more about it; don’t be vexed.”

He left the subject with a suppressed sigh. It was one never mentioned between them, and touched the bitterest disappointment of Meredyth’s life.

On her distant window seat Vivien had heard nothing. On another day her quick self-consciousness might have made her suspicious, but this afternoon she

had too many and too exciting thoughts to fill her mind. Her own concerns absorbed her, and she had dreams which made her pale-blue eyes shine and her lips quiver.

Vivien had grown into a very pretty girl. The months which had changed the summer of one year into the early spring of the next had changed her too. She had developed and grown a shade taller; her face and figure had lost their angularity, and she had learned to dress and a new way of doing her pretty, fair hair.

Her manner had grown more equal and assured—perhaps too assured. An autumn at Merevale under her aunt's careless chaperonage had not gone for nothing.

There was a hard look in Viva's eyes which was not pleasant, and her manner was instinctively defiant.

But she was very pretty and sometimes amusing, though she had not entirely abandoned the youthful trick of snubbing men with smart speeches and expecting them to like it.

Still she was becoming sufficiently attractive to arouse Lady Meredyth's jealousy, a jealousy which never failed to resent any attention paid to a young girl in her presence.

That afternoon some of Lady Meredyth's own particular knights had bestowed quite too much consideration on Viva and her violin.

So it was obviously high time for Viva to go to Ireland.

CHAPTER II.

“ . . . My dearest child, I am pining for a sight of you. Now that there are only streets between us, it seems worse to be separated. Viva, if you have any love and pity left for your mother, if my enemies have not destroyed all feeling for me in my child's heart, come to me. I am a very miserable woman. I could never make you understand what I have suffered. Darling, don't take away the last comfort in my miserable life by refusing to come to me! . . . ”

The letter wandered on into several sheets.

When Vivien had first got it, it had brought her only the completest joy—joy at the prospect of seeing her mother, joy in feeling that somebody wanted her, that there was somebody to whom she was not simply an encumbrance. The complaints of misery did not trouble her much; she was used to her mother's use of exaggerated terms.

She had counted the hours which separated her from the meeting with feverish impatience, utterly incapable of drawing her thoughts from it for one moment. She had lived in a dream, treasuring her secret.

It was only when the longed-for afternoon itself came that any misgivings came with it.

It was not that there were any difficulties about keeping the appointment. Vivien was a good deal left to herself; Lady Meredyth had her own engagements, and found the fact that Viva had not as yet been presented an excellent reason for leaving her at home. Viva had resented being sent back into childhood, but now she had reason to be glad.

It was not, either, that any misgivings about the right or wrong of what she was going to do troubled her. Vivien did not care; right or wrong, she said to herself, nothing should stop her.

But the small details were unpleasant.

Vivien knew the house she was going to very well; she had often been there with her mother, and she had often met Major Arkwright-Gage.

She felt dimly that her mother might better have appointed some other place of meeting.

Then, as she drove through the streets, it troubled her how she was to ask for her mother, and the fear of meeting Major Arkwright-Gage possessed her.

When she got out of the hansom she was shaking from head to foot, and for a moment her voice was gone.

She said "I think I am expected" in such a low voice that she had to repeat her words.

Then there were a few moments during which she was too deaf and blind with excitement to know what was happening.

Only she was with her mother once more—her mother, looking, Viva thought, prettier and sweeter than

ever. In the first moment she felt the long-dreamed-of meeting to be all she had hoped for.

It was only later on, when she and her mother sat side by side, hand touching hand, that she became conscious of a vague, increasing sense of disappointment. The year's separation, being what it was, had placed an impalpable but strong barrier between them.

There was so much they could not speak of; Vivien found herself carefully choosing her words.

"My dearest child, how much we have to say to each other!" said Mrs. Meredyth; but nevertheless their words flagged, with uncomfortable pauses.

Vivien found herself studying her mother for the first time in her life with critical eyes.

She was a decidedly pretty woman—a woman made up so skilfully that the nearest observer was held in doubt. She had small, regular features, and had once had a very pretty complexion. Now it was a trifle hard and fixed, and there were lines under her eyes and at the corners of her pretty, drooping mouth which would not be entirely hidden.

Vivien found herself looking at her in a curious way, as if she was seeing her for the first time.

She was glad that the room was one in which she had never been before—a small, cosy place, a mixture of sitting- and writing-room.

Mrs. Meredyth half lay, half sat on a sofa in front of the fire; she was a woman who had too much respect for her clothes and her hair ever to make herself thoroughly comfortable on a sofa.

Vivien sat close beside her, her face glowing with excitement and the flame of the fire.

It was what Vivien had dreamed of again and again, and just the place for confidences. But she found herself struggling with commonplace remarks to cover silences.

"And you are with Judith? She was always my enemy. Viva, dearest, I am sure she has tried to poison your mind against me. Is your love for me gone?"

Vivien was just at the age to be made as uncomfortable as a boy by sentiment. But from her mother she had always been used to it.

She said eagerly: "Of course, mamma, you know it isn't."

Mrs. Meredyth sighed.

"Don't let them make you cruel to me, Viva," she said; "*your* love is the one thing I have got left out of the wreck of my life. I am very, very miserable. Darling, I am terribly lonely. From morning to night I am by myself, often. You can't think how I miss you! how I sit here and wonder and long for my children!"

Eager words of love and comfort rose to Vivien's lips. Might she stay with her mother? Might she stay, now, and never go back to be an unwelcome burden to other people? She would devote every minute to making her mother happy.

But her eyes fell on the stem of the pipe, carelessly thrown on the mantlesheff, and she was suddenly silent.

"I am a miserable woman," Mrs. Meredyth said,

shedding a few tears. "I married so young, before I knew what I was doing, and everything has been against me. Vivien, I must tell you what I can tell no one else: I may be left penniless any day. And that isn't the worst. O Viva, you don't know how cruelly I am treated—how much I have to suffer! Sometimes I feel as if I should be driven to end my wretched life. Come and see me often, my pet; it is my only comfort."

"I am so sorry," said Vivien, in a voice sharp with pain.

She felt herself unresponsive, although her heart ached with pity and pain. But the cause and the man that made her mother suffer could not be mentioned between them, and the knowledge crippled her speech.

"And now I must send you away. What a happy time this has been, darling! Have you grown taller, or is it your long dresses? How sweet you look, my precious child, and how I wish I could keep you longer! But we are going to the Haymarket to-night, and we are dining early."

The "we" froze Viva's farewell words in spite of all her efforts to be loving and natural.

Her mother came to the room door and kissed her warmly, and waved her hand to her at every turn of the stairs.

While the footman was getting her cloak in the hall and Viva was waiting in an agony of impatience the hall door suddenly opened with a latchkey, and a stout, handsome man, with rather a red face, came in.

Vivien knew him at once. She grew very white,

and pulled her cloak roughly round her, moving toward the door without waiting to fasten it.

Major Arkwright-Gage, on his part, reddened and drew back, half doubtfully. He would, perhaps, have spoken if Viva had not turned an absolutely unseeing glance on him as she passed.

The door closed heavily behind her, and the episode was over.

But in her room that night she wept the bitterest, most hopeless tears she had ever shed in her life.

She did not ask herself or try to realize why she felt more forlorn, more acutely miserable than she had ever felt.

CHAPTER III.

“MISS MEREDYTH, how fearfully late you are! People have come and people have gone; men, women, and children have been here to ask for help and to offer it, to give information, and to get it, and, their business done, they have gone and others have come in their places. And still I have sat here, kicking my heels and waiting for you.”

Abram Sassoon had had the upper room of the Church Organization Society office practically to himself for the last half hour, and had found the time hang heavily.

“I’ve written part of an immortal work on the backs of all the relief forms I could find, and I should fancy it’s imprisonment for life at the least if I’m found out. And it’s all your fault, Miss Meredyth. Surely a lady’s license stops at keeping a fellow two hours waiting!”

“I am very sorry,” said Vivien with unexpected meekness, and something in her voice made Sassoon’s expression change; “and I can’t even go to Quin’s with you after all. I was very nearly not coming at all, and then I thought I should like to—for the last time.”

“The last time!” Sassoon echoed.

“I am going to Ireland to-day.”

"Oh, I *say*!"

Sassoon's face fell with flattering promptitude.

"And you won't be at Lord's to-morrow?"

Vivien shook her head.

"Nor down here for the music class on Monday?"

"Of course not."

"I say, what a horrid nuisance!"

They stood silently facing each other across the table, which Sassoon had made untidy.

Presently he said with some hesitation:

"Will you say I'm cheeky, Miss Meredyth, if I ask if there's anything wrong?"

"There's everything wrong," said Viva tragically.

She looked at Sassoon, who met her eyes with his, full of sympathy.

"I'll tell you," she said suddenly, "not that you can help me—nobody can. Aunt Judith has found out that I go to see—my mother. And she says that unless I promise never to go again I must leave her house."

The place was not a good one for confidences. A curate came in, cutting short Vivien's speech and in eager pursuit of the papers of a man named White, whose reference could not be discovered. Of course the papers were at the very bottom of a basketful, and then Sassoon was appealed to for information about some meeting.

Vivien sat down and gave her attention to a directory.

"My dear fellow, ask McCrae," said Sassoon impa-

tently; "he's downstairs, and is much better up in the details than I am. I might put you wrong. And you'd better hurry up, for he's going round with pensions later on. Here's your hat, and don't forget your papers."

The curate was almost hustled out of the room, and Sassoon turned to Viva, hot with sympathy.

"And is Lady Meredyth turning you out?" he said.

"I am not waiting to be turned out," said Viva proudly.

"It's very hard luck," Sassoon began, and then somebody came in to consult a directory.

When they had the room to themselves again Sassoon said:

"You must go to Miss Carnegie. She will settle it all."

Vivien interrupted him passionately.

"To Alison—*never!* Mr. Sassoon, you don't understand, but that is *totally* impossible. Alison is the *last* person!"

"I certainly don't understand," said Sassoon, with sudden stiffness.

"But don't be offended with me, please," said Viva, with the meekness of despair; "if you turn against me there is no one."

It was her tone more than her words which mollified Sassoon immediately, helped by a certain amount of flattered vanity.

A mention of Alison, whose name rose readily to Sassoon's lips, meant always that they jarred with each other and interrupted their friendliness.

"I think you are making a mistake," he said, "but, of course, I'll do anything I can for you. If you must go, who is going with you?"

"Nobody," said Vivien; "I am going alone."

"I don't like it at all," said Sassoon discontentedly; "it's not even like travelling about England. But going to Ireland—look here, Miss Meredyth, what would you say to my going with you—at least as far as Belfast? I've never been to Ireland, and I don't like your going by yourself. I could look after you a bit."

"And have everybody saying that we had eloped," said Vivian with a sudden laugh. "No, thank you, Mr. Sassoon."

"It's a great pity," he said meditatively, "that I'm not married."

"I don't think," said Vivien, "that that would make it any better."

"What I meant was that you could have come to stay with me. But at any rate, Miss Meredyth, I'll come to Euston with you. I'll wire to O'Neil to get some one to do my district—there's not much to do this afternoon as it happens—only some cricket business. Miss Meredyth, it's a horrid shame; I shall miss you dreadfully."

"I *hope* you will," said Viva; "it isn't nice to think that nobody will miss me."

"Of course I shall," said Sassoon; "and I'll tell you what, I'll come over and see you in Ireland if I may. I'll come and fish and play golf and stay at the hotel."

"Will you really?" said Vivien breathlessly.

"Certainly I will. You'll show me round, won't

you? and I'll teach you golf. It will be awfully jolly."

Sassoon and Vivien began to enjoy the episode, Sassoon without an afterthought, and Viva with many satisfactory recollections of how little her aunt knew of her proceedings.

They went up to the city on the top of an omnibus and lunched there, and Viva felt delightfully dissipated and wicked.

Further crimes were prevented by the necessity of securing her belongings in time for the train. This was successfully accomplished.

Lady Meredyth was out, and Viva secured a footman and had her boxes, already packed, safely brought down to the cab. The footman was probably surprised at their casual proceedings, especially as Viva gave him a message with the air of an afterthought:

"Oh, Robinson, tell her ladyship that I won't be in to dinner; I've gone to Ireland."

The rest was easy.

They drove to Euston in plenty of time, and Sassoon provided Viva with everything she possibly could or could not want on her journey, and got her a carriage to herself.

He stood on the step and talked to her with the usual jerky words of farewell.

"It's awfully good of you to let me see you off. But I wish I could go with you."

"I wish you could," said Viva, with some sinking of heart.

“And I wish Miss Carnegie—but there, I mustn’t talk about that. Are you sure there is nothing else I can get you?”

“Nothing, thank you.”

“And, I say, may I write and tell you how we are getting on down East?”

Sassoon was very sorry for her—so sorry that his interest had flamed up, and he wanted to say something to make her feel less lonely.

“Don’t forget,” he said, “that I am coming to see you in a month or two.”

Viva nodded, and smiled rather forlornly. They had seen a good deal of each other during the past winter at Merevale and elsewhere, and this odd day together seemed to have advanced their friendship with a leap.

It was a day of possibilities and sudden impulses; anything—a word, a look—might have changed their whole lives.

Very little more would have induced a young man not accustomed to deny himself to jump into the carriage and go off to Ireland without so much as a toothbrush.

But a porter told him to stand back just at the right moment, and Viva made no further reference to her loneliness.

The sudden possibility was gone for ever.

He only took her hand firmly in his and looked at her eagerly as the train began to move.

“Don’t let any other fellow teach you golf,” he said.

CHAPTER IV.

“So you have arrived!” said Meredyth.

He had sauntered down the pier as the ferryboat came in, and been in time to greet Vivien as she landed and accept a perfunctory kiss.

Vivien was dusty and dirty and tired. She felt as if she had been travelling for years, though it was really not quite twenty-four hours since she had bidden good-bye to Abram Sassoon at Euston.

But she had had so many changes and stoppages and waits here and there, and, never having been on the sea before, she had not been able to sleep during her night crossing from Liverpool to Belfast.

Since her landing she had a vague general impression of short, slow journeys and long waits, ending in this ferryboat crossing, which Viva, with the Slanamulagh coach pointed out to her on the other side, had found the most wearisome of all.

Now, all at once, something in the coldness and indifference of her father's greeting made her wish the end of her journey farther off.

Meredyth was dressed with as careful a consideration of suitability as he had ever been in town. He looked very young to be the father of a girl like Viva, and very

smart and pleasant to look upon. But she had never felt the barrier between them more keenly.

"I'll send a man to see to your boxes," her father said; "I suppose your name is on them?"

"Yes," said Viva. "Father, I couldn't help coming. I really couldn't."

"However that may be, here you are," said Meredyth, "and you have twenty-four miles to drive still."

Vivien stiffened to defiance at his tone.

"I should not have come if I could have helped it."

"Well, as for that, I suppose your Uncle Jack would have kept you, or Alison Carnegie."

"Oh, I know," said Viva, in a hard voice, "even without your telling me so plainly, that you don't want me. But nobody else wants me either, so I don't see what I could do but come here or drown myself."

"Pooh, my dear child! You don't expect me to be blowing pæans of joy when you have upset all my arrangements for you and sent me a telegram which cost me sixteen shillings. And as to not helping it, I suppose you wanted to come, and you came. You have the family tendency to do what you like.—Is the luggage all in, O'Hara?"

Vivien made no answer. She could not trust her voice sufficiently to answer, and she drew her lips tightly together.

She told herself passionately that she *hated* her father, and wished she was dead.

She let herself be helped to her seat on the coach in silence. Two elderly married couples were the only

other people going, and their luggage and Vivien's was soon in.

Then Meredyth, paying no further attention to his daughter, mounted the box, and in a moment they were off.

It was a long drive. Vivien, lost in self-pity, paid very little attention to her surroundings. She had an impression of fields and bogs and a background of heather-covered mountains. Now and then, as they rounded a turn, there was a glimpse of injutting sea; once they got so close that from her high seat she could look down a stretch of cliff on white-tossing waves below. Afterwards they turned back into the country and drove between fields where cattle grazed, and others where the crop was being put in. More curious than the cattle, who were too much used to the coach to do more than raise their heads lazily for a moment, the people always stopped to stare, standing with bare legs and clothes kilted to the knee in the brown furrows.

Vivien, her thoughts far away, leaned back in her seat and drew her cloak round her closely to keep off the bitter gusts of wind.

Meredyth spoke to her once or twice, and always when they changed horses, which was three times. The last time a pair of heavily made, strong animals were harnessed, and the final two miles of the drive was through loose, thick sand, with sand hills and sea on either side.

Once, the tide being high, they drove splashing

across a bay, where the water broke in little waves against the wheels of the coach.

When they reached dry sand once more the hotel was in sight, and their way was dotted with small boys, anxiously looking out for the arrival of golfers. The sight of a set of clubs belonging to one of the elderly couples aroused much enthusiasm and rivalry.

Vivien heaved a sigh of relief at sight of the hotel.

The house had not been a large one. In the Meredyths' father's time it had been let to various people who had successively tried and failed to make a fortune out of it. For the last ten years Lord Meredyth had taken it into his own hands, and had been better able to afford finding it, as he had found it, a loss.

He was now trying to work on a larger scale. A second wing, little smaller than the rest of the house, was finished, except in one corner, where a scaffolding still stood; he had improved the coach and started a steam launch, and brought over a wooden billiard room and covered tennis court from Norway.

As a result, the hotel straggled a good deal, and looked wide and unwieldy, especially where two covered passages connected it with the billiard room and tennis court and some baths.

It stood all alone, with a shelter of sand hills which blotted out all view, except from upper windows, but was quite necessary in winter.

A broad veranda stretched along the whole front of the hotel, and various stray people were lounging about it, most of them having tea or waiting for it.

A group of golfers, conspicuous in their bright-red coats, had just come in, and their caddies, a picturesque trio of shock-headed, bare-legged boys, were polishing their clubs. Three old ladies on easy chairs knitted and gossiped. A girl in a blue blouse leaned over the veranda railing and talked to a couple of men with fishing rods.

But everybody turned to look at the coach as it drove up.

When Meredyth got down and threw the reins to a groom there was a general movement in his direction; everybody seemed to want something.

“Is my cleek finished, Mr. Meredyth? Have you got it?”

“Do you mean to say my bicycle hasn’t come? Why it is nearly a week since I wrote for it; are you *sure?*”

“Mr. Meredyth, what time does the coach start for Bellcoe Bay to-morrow?”

“Mr. Meredyth, may we dance to-night?”

Viva stood a little aside, intensely conscious of being stared at and studied with interest as a newcomer.

She almost admired the calm way her father passed on, with answers which were slight but always polite.

He dismissed his daughter with equal civility and promptitude on the first opportunity. Jossy, when he came rushing eagerly to meet her, was pressed in the service. Meredyth, with a few words, suggested that he should take his sister to her room, and himself sauntered off to the billiard room.

He was not pleased to see Vivien, and he had no desire to pretend that he was.

Why had she not been content to stay with the Meredyths and make herself happy there? A girl with the smallest modicum of sense would have made up her mind to endure Judith; but the least opposition sent Vivien off at a tangent.

Well, it was very unlikely she would ever be asked to the Meredyths again now; she would probably find reason to regret her present proceedings. Her father already found reason to regret them.

With Milly at school, the responsibility of Jossy had been very light, and Meredyth had found the child a pleasure.

But Vivien as a charge promised to be another matter. Unmanageable at home, she was sure to be much more unmanageable in the greater freedom of hotel life.

There seemed something absurd, too, in collecting his family round him. Little Jossy was one thing; a grown-up daughter was quite another.

The inevitable rubs and disagreeables of his present life, easily borne alone, would be a thousand times intensified under Vivien's unfriendly eyes.

And the life would be so bad for her.

Meredyth honestly believed this to be the chief reason for his annoyance, pressing the others to the background of his mind.

CHAPTER V.

“Jossy, how often have I to tell you not to be so rough?”

Vivien had got up late, and established herself in a comfortable corner of the veranda with a book. But her thoughts were quite elsewhere; she had read the same sentence over five or six times with utter want of comprehension.

Close beside her a group of old ladies were knitting and gossiping, exactly as they had been knitting and gossiping when she arrived the evening before, and at the other end of the veranda a very promising flirtation was progressing.

Everybody else was out, pursuing some form of amusement. The red coats of the golfers made little patches of colour all over the sand hills.

Vivien, too tired after her journey and too depressed to be energetic, was dreamily thinking of the East End and Sassoon, and resented being jerked back to reality by Jossy.

“How often have I told you not to be so rough?” she said tartly, drawing her dress away from the little boy’s eager clasp.

His small, plain face fell; he stood hesitating.

"I am very sorry, Viva; I forgot. I wanted to show you something."

"And what on earth have you got on? Why, it's Milly's old red-flannel dressing jacket!"

Jossy grew vividly crimson.

"It's for golf, Viva. I had no red coat, and Mrs. Packenham said no one would know."

"Jossy! A boy of your age might have more sense! Go up to your room and take the ridiculous thing off directly."

Jossy was quite overwhelmed. He looked at his sister for a moment with crimson face, and hot, shamed tears in his eyes; then he flung away passionately.

"I am *sorry* you have come—you nasty, selfish, *ugly* thing!"

"Don't be silly," said Viva impatiently. She was annoyed with herself and with him, and his words hurt her.

One of the old ladies turned and spoke to her doubtfully.

"Poor little fellow! He was so pleased with his red coat!" she said.

"He is a very naughty boy," said Vivien stiffly.

How dared a vulgar old woman with a crooked cap and an inch of wrinkled stocking showing below her dress—how dared she reprove her?

But the old lady merely thought she was shy.

"You look very dull, my dear. You ought to be out with the rest. I wonder could we not find some one to play golf with you."

"I don't play golf. I prefer to read, thank you."

A very stout lady stopped Viva's return to her book by assuring her that she would take to golf before she had been long at Slanamullagh.

"I don't think so," said Viva.

"But I am sure of it," said the old lady.

"Of course," her first friend chimed in, "you have only just arrived. How glad your father must be to have you!"

Glad! Viva felt a pang of quick self-pity. She gave a short laugh.

"It's lonely for him. Of course the little boy is not a companion like you. Has your mother been dead long, my dear?"

It was absolutely the first time Vivien had heard an allusion to her mother. At home the people had all known more about it than she did herself, and circled carefully round a mention of her name.

It came upon Viva like a shock, and she started and coloured.

"My mother is not dead," she said roughly.

In the surprise, almost amounting to consternation, caused by her words she made rather an awkward escape.

She put on her hat and wandered aimlessly out of the hotel and over the sand hills. She told herself she wanted to be alone, aching all the time for some one to speak to. But she was braced against the world, anticipating dislike and unkindness and hastening to discover and resent it.

Nobody liked or wanted her, and she would want and like no one.

She would not admit to herself that she was beginning to find the world a hard thing to fight—too hard for a cross, sore-hearted little girl of eighteen.

As she reached the top of the sand hills she came into a fresher air. The breeze blew her serge dress, twisting it round her. She had to hold on her hat and struggle against it, finding, in spite of herself, a certain pleasure in the effort.

At the end of her climb the sea stretched before her.

The gray waves broke on gray rocks and burst into whiteness. Along the sand they came in less roughly, hurrying, one wave following fast upon another.

There was a joy in being so high up, and a sense of companionship in the sea. Viva, as she stood looking down upon the waves, breathing in salt whiffs from them, with their continuous dull roar in her ears, felt her spirits rise unaccountably.

Yet it was not a cheerful day. Splashes of white, diminishing gradually into mere dots, spread over the sea till its grayness melted into the grayness of the sky. One or two fishing boats were tossing about, with an exhilarating suggestion of danger.

Viva felt all things were more in tune with her than if they had been blue and sunny; her sense of desolateness began to slip away.

A golf ball flew past her, preceding the sound of voices.

With one glance back at the hotel, far below her among the sand hills, she began to climb down to the sea.

She had meant to avoid the golfers, but as she scrambled down a steep sandy slope she suddenly found herself on a putting-green, and almost face to face with two players.

A moment later all the growing pleasure faded out of Viva's pretty face, displaced by the hard look which was becoming habitual to it, as she recognised her father.

He had just made a hole, and as he turned to his companion, a tall, rather good-looking woman, his eyes met his daughter's.

The expression that flashed into Viva's face was quite legible to him. He saw the meeting had come to her with a shock—a shock in which she realized there were women in the world to be feared besides Alison.

Meredyth had grown quite used to think of himself as a free man, but every fresh realization of it brought him a certain pleasure.

He put up his hand to stroke his mustache and hide a smile at the consternation in Viva's face.

“Hullo, Viva!” he said, bringing his words with a drawl of special deliberation.—“Mrs. Pakenham, may I introduce my daughter to you?”

Vivien was at her stiffest and most ungracious in a moment.

Meredyth watched the severity with which Mrs. Pakenham's advances were received with much amusement.

When a stroke had separated him from his opponent for a moment, he said carelessly to Viva:

"You needn't put yourself out to come round with us, my dear. It's all right; the caddies never lose sight of us."

"I see," said Viva hotly, "it is quite time I came."

Meredyth shrugged his shoulders.

"I am afraid," he said, "we shall have an exhausting time chaperoning each other. Your ball went a little more to the right, Mrs. Packenham. Shall I come and have a look?"

Vivien felt her position untenable. She followed awkwardly for a couple of holes, and then left them and went back to the hotel.

Disagreeables seemed crowding, and she met everything as a tragedy, looking for the worst. She already saw her father married to Mrs. Packenham.

In the evening, he, with a certain amount of malice, came to the public drawing-room for the first time since he had been at the hotel, and encouraged Mrs. Packenham to sing, leaning over her and challenging Vivien's eyes.

If the child was such a fool as to think a man who had known Alison Carnegie was in danger from an affected little fool like Mrs. Packenham, why, she deserved to suffer. He failed to remember that he had never given his daughter reason to believe him particular.

Mrs. Packenham's airs amused him, and her flattery,

coarse though it was, pleased a man who found all flattery welcome.

Vivien tried not to watch them, but found she could not help it.

In her suppressed irritation Jossy presented himself as a victim, and another battle with him ended this most disagreeable of days.

Jossy, if he had been spoiled at home, was much more spoiled now.

He was a quick, amusing little fellow, and everybody made much of him, some people for his own sake, and some, perhaps, for his father's.

Meredyth was handsome, he had beautiful manners, and sometimes took the trouble to make himself very charming. He was popularly supposed to be a widower, and known to be the brother of the Earl of Meredyth—some people had even discovered that it was on the cards he might some day be an earl himself.

This was generally carefully explained to newcomers, who were inclined to think his position anomalous.

Consequently he was a centre of interest in a hotel where men were few in this early part of the season and women were many.

Jossy added the reflected popularity of his father to his own, and profited by it to have much of his own way.

When Viva's attention was suddenly called to him he was sitting on the floor in a circle of admiring ladies arranging a collection of shells. Jossy had a mania for

collecting. In London he had collected crests and stamps; here he went in for shells and seaweed and sea anenomes.

"Jossy," said Viva sharply, "do you know that it is ten o'clock? You ought to have been in bed two hours ago."

Jossy looked up from his shells defiantly.

"I never go to bed till I choose," he said.

"Don't be absurd. Put that rubbish away like a good boy, and go at once."

Jossy took no notice; he began to rearrange his shells, drawing his mouth into obstinate lines, and looking like an absurd little miniature of his father in a similar mood.

"Jossy, do you hear me?"

Vivien spoke in a low voice, conscious of all the other people in the room. When Jossy made no answer, she went up to him and repeated her words in an angry whisper.

"Father," said Jossy, in his shrillest voice, "I needn't go to bed, need I?"

Meredyth was still among the music with Mrs. Packenham. He started and turned round in his chair.

"What is the matter?" he said.

Jossy scrambled to his feet and went over to his father's side.

"Need I go to bed? Please say I need not," he repeated insistently.

"Father," said Vivien, "this is an absurd hour for Jossy to be up." She was exceedingly angry and in-

dignant. Jossy had never before completely rebelled from her authority.

Meredyth felt himself ridiculous, and was consequently annoyed.

He raised his eyebrows.

"I think, if you will excuse me saying so, you had *both* better go to bed," he said. "Jossy, Vivien is quite right."

He ended, seeing a storm in Vivien's face, and doubtful of her self-control.

"But, father, I never go to bed till I like when Viva is not here."

"Then the sooner you get into good habits the better," said Meredyth, turning away.

Mrs. Pakenham put in a plea for Jossy, which Viva felt unendurable, till Meredyth dismissed it slightly and sent off Jossy, pouting, with a few decided words.

"I am *very* sorry you came," he repeated to Vivien with passion.

When the child had felt the room and Mrs. Pakenham had begun to play a thunderous march Meredyth turned to Vivien and gave her a few words in his slowest drawl.

"Vivien, I am quite aware that Jossy and I are an anxious responsibility, but do try to manage us less violently. Don't let us *both* have to say we are sorry you came."

CHAPTER VI.

“THERE is the manager. Sir, I want to tell you that the mutton chops we had at breakfast were too tough to eat—disgracefully tough.”

The little fat, gray-bearded man who spoke was working himself up to indignation. He had only arrived the night before, but had already proved himself to be a man of many complaints.

Vivien, realizing that her father was addressed, looked up with a start from the book she had on her knee, using it less to read than as a protection.

Meredyth was examining Mrs. Packenham's bicycle just outside the veranda.

He looked up vaguely.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I was speaking, sir, of the mutton at breakfast. In a place like this, where the terms are so high, you ought to be *ashamed* of such mutton.”

Meredyth found himself colouring faintly under Vivien's eye, and drawled his answer.

“I can't see why I should be ashamed, as I am neither the cook nor the butcher,” he said, and turned his back.—“Mrs. Packenham, I think it is all right now.”

Just at her elbow Vivien heard a horrified explanation from an older resident.

She caught the words: "An honourable," "the Earl of Meredyth's brother," and a dismayed exclamation or two from the newcomer, followed by a suggestion of apology.

She was faintly amused, while uneasily conscious that she had no bicycle, and that, once mounted, her father and Mrs. Pakenham would be beyond her chaperonage.

Mrs. Pakenham also fully expected his society. She deserved it, as for the last quarter of an hour she had been trying to enjoy having tiny and very wet crabs crawled over her by Jossy.

Poor Mrs. Pakenham smiled heroically and tried to look as if she liked having her too-smart dress splashed with salt water.

But Meredyth saw her off serenely, without an idea of accompanying her, though he was not the man to be unconscious that she expected it.

He could not have gone had he wished, as he had to drive the coach to the ferry.

He started very soon afterward, finding, as he always did, a certain satisfaction in gathering the reins into his hand and making the four horses answer to his control.

But it was a long, solitary drive. Almost at once he found thoughts, chiefly unpleasant ones, flooding in upon him, and he had ceased to be able to throw them aside.

More than a year ago the easy, comfortable life he had led for so long had come to an abrupt end. He

had tried at first to shut out disagreeables still, as he had done for so long; even now there were times when he tried.

But he seldom succeeded for long. Removed from the influence of habit, transplanted from the life become to him as second nature, he found himself daily more keenly awake to his position.

It was degrading, almost discreditable, for a man of his age to be, as it were, beginning life. Meredyth, with keenest pain, recognised crows' feet and odd gray hairs. And he was no further advanced than he had been twenty years ago.

He had meant to do so much, and he had done nothing. His contemporaries had passed him in every direction, striking out toward success. In many cases they had already reached it, and people knew their names.

And nothing had stood in his way; he had been clever enough, well-off, powerfully connected—nothing but a certain supineness, an indolence, from which, Meredyth told himself with a gleam of his old vanity, if Evelyn had had a spark of intellect, she might easily have roused him.

Why had he wasted his life? Why had he not married Alison Carnegie?

Meredyth drove on unseeingly. The bitterness of too late was upon him. In his self-pity and self-contempt he was surprised to find stinging tears spring to his eyes.

Alison grew before him with her sweet eager face and soft brown hair.

With her he would have made something of his life, and not found himself left stranded at forty.

But he had no right, absolutely no right, to dream of Alison now.

In no possible way—not by the sweat of his brow or the very barter of his soul—could he make those twenty wasted years as if they had not been.

It was too late to begin—Meredyth recognised it was out of his power to begin; he had lost the energy, the capability for concentration, which alone could help him—rather he had thrown it away.

He could not change the character he had allowed to form. It was a thousand times too late.

And yet only one man's life stood between him and all he wished for—one man's life, but a life that was as good as, indeed better than, his. Before him the possibility of this fresh chance in life would always be, to come to him, perhaps, when he was an old man and had lost all power of hope of enjoyment.

It was unbearable to have to sit there, with no means of escaping from his thoughts.

Meredyth swore to himself under his breath. He lighted a cigar and tried to think of other things—of the horses out at the farm—of an effort he had made the other evening toward starting an article suitable for some sporting paper. He thought of Mrs. Pakenham, and tried to imagine himself into an interest in her beyond the soothing effect of her admiration and flattery.

But he could not. Her ridiculous little airs and

graces, her vulgarities, her flattery of Jossy, flocked into his mind, bringing a half smile to his lips.

With them came a thought of Viva.

What was to be done with her? How was it possible for him to look after her as she needed to be looked after? How could he look after her at all without making himself ridiculous?

Even this morning he had noticed that she was beginning to wake up to interest in the people in the hotel. He had seen her brighten visibly under the opening attentions of a bumptious young man he suspected of a shop.

Vivien had no sense, no perception, and a keen liking for a man. How could she fail in this, he asked himself sarcastically, if heredity went for anything?

If she could not recognise a gentleman, and found knickerbockers and flannels all-sufficient, what could he do?

And she was not given to frankness; what she did gained an extra gratification in being done secretly. It was a fatal place for her.

Meredyth found his thoughts were not growing more cheerful. He checked the horses and told the groom to come to the box-seat.

The rest of the way he sought and found refuge in words, and on the way back a man who was coming to the hotel for a week's fishing sat beside him and proved congenial, raising his spirits.

When he drove up to the hotel with his coach of new arrivals the first person he caught sight of was Viva.

She was sitting on the veranda railing, her pretty face alight with eagerness and excitement, and she was talking to the young man Meredyth found so offensive.

As he watched them they turned away and walked off among the sand hills.

So it had begun already.

Meredyth shrugged his shoulders and sauntered into the hotel.

CHAPTER VII.

THE next few weeks passed slowly enough. The hotel grew gradually fuller, and Meredyth found himself with a fair amount to do.

But, except as far as the farm six miles off was concerned, his occupations were exceedingly uncongenial. He had to arrange picnics and expeditions, plan golf and tennis tournaments, and make himself generally agreeable.

There were days when he told himself he could stand the life no longer—that he must throw it up and find something else to do.

But the memory of his difficult struggle and Pimley's ale, the thought of his four children, held him.

He found Vivien a very disturbing element in his life.

She was entirely rebellious. She found herself much admired, and the constant excitement of it passed the days.

Meredyth saw that it was *any* man, and found it intensely disagreeable.

He said nothing at first, but Viva found an added excitement in imagining him in the light of a cruel parent. She made mysteries, enjoying them.

The constant strain and a dim sense that she was acting foolishly made her irritable, and she and Jossy quarrelled constantly.

Sometimes a few acts of careless civility on Meredyth's part roused her into a jealous watch upon his action, so pronounced occasionally as to threaten to make him ridiculous.

He was a man always to find pleasure in women's society, and the consciousness of Viva's observation sometimes goaded him on, while at times it restrained him.

Once an old lady to whom he had exerted himself to be charming spoke to him about Viva.

Meredyth was very polite.

"There are some men," he said, "one can see at once are destined for husbands and fathers. I'm not. I should make a very decent sort of son, and a passable lover. That is, I should have made," he added quickly, acutely sensitive to a possible opening for ridicule.

But that evening he did gather all his resolution and spoke to Vivien. He disliked doing so intensely.

It was a delicious evening. Most of the people in the hotel had come out on the veranda after dinner.

A few rowdy spirits had seized a couple of invalid's bath chairs, and two girls were being raced up and down the passages in them.

While Meredyth hesitated, as he always did, to make himself disagreeable by interference, an invalid protested and they were driven out.

Vivien had been a ringleader. She came out to the veranda, flushed and laughing, with a couple of men in attendance.

She had on a white alpaca skirt and a pale blue blouse that matched her eyes. She had stuck a blue tam-o'-shanter on the top of her fair hair, and she looked very pretty.

"I think golf by moonlight would be splendid," she said.

Meredyth moved deliberately down the veranda to her side.

"Vivien," he said, "I want to speak to you."

Vivien turned a suddenly defiant face on him.

"Well?" she said.

"Come as far as the first putting green."

Vivien raised her eyebrows with a careful expression of surprise.

"Certainly," she said.—"Mr. Manning, don't forget you have promised to bring out your banjo."

Meredyth made no further remark. He waited for her calmly, throwing away his cigarette, and deliberately making himself a fresh one.

When they were out of hearing of the others Vivien turned on him at once.

"Well?" she said. "Whatever it is we had better get it over."

Meredyth paused to strike a match.

"My dear Viva, I wish your manners were not so deplorable," he said.

Vivien gave an impatient movement.

"I don't suppose you have brought me out here to discuss my manners."

"I think that would be quite sufficient justification. What I really wanted to ask you, Vivien, is whether you can honestly recommend Mr. Manning as a dentist."

Vivien coloured hotly.

"It is all very well to sneer. Lots of dentists are gentlemen."

"I have no doubt of it. It is beside the question that Mr. Manning is not. But do you think——"

"And at any rate a dentist is as good as a hotel keeper."

Meredyth stiffened suddenly and perceptibly. For a moment or two he was silent, suppressing an inclination to anger; then he laughed.

"Another of your friends is, to the best of my belief, in a shop, and Mr. Blessington did me the honour to inform me he was in the finance department, which I have discovered to be a poetical way of saying he is a bank clerk."

"Well," said Viva, "and what then? What does a man's profession matter, or his birth for the matter of that?"

Meredyth gave a long whistle.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I had no idea you were a socialist."

"I am a socialist so far," said Viva hotly, "that I refuse to see any reason for treating people as the dirt beneath your feet because they happen to be in a slightly different rank of life."

"It is pleasant to find a point on which we entirely agree," said Meredyth.

"And in my opinion one man is as good as another."

"Very probably you are right, my dear; but may I in my turn remind you that I did not bring you here to listen to a lecture on socialism? Your sentiments do you honour. But are you aware that while engrossed in socialism you are getting yourself considerably talked about?"

Vivien stamped her foot impatiently.

"Talked about! I am sure I don't care! A lot of scandalous, vulgar old gossips—who minds what they say?"

"Be consistent, Vivien; one man is as good as another. If you don't care, I do. Vivien, I would be very much obliged if you would even go so far as to leave the running after to be done by your friends—it would be more dignified."

"Father!"

"Once for all, I can't have you going on as you are doing, and I won't. You are disgracing yourself and me, and making little of yourself. I tell you, it must stop."

Meredyth ended in his coldest and most cutting tones.

Vivien turned on him furiously.

"I don't care—I don't care in the smallest degree *what* you think!" she said passionately. "Why should I? You have neglected me all my life, and now, just

because you choose to say a word, I am to give up everything! But I don't care—what you choose to say or think makes *no* difference to me.”

She waited for no answer. She turned abruptly from her father, hurrying back to the hotel with quick, agitated steps, leaving Meredyth standing where he was, meditatively drawing circles in the sand with his stick.

Vivien's words had hurt him keenly, and there was pain as well as utter perplexity in his mind. He knew he had done harm rather than good, recognising it still more clearly when he came back to the hotel and found Mr. Manning and Vivien had vanished together.

He went to his room and smoked one pipe after another, trying to think what he should do.

Before he went to bed he wrote a long letter to Alison Carnegie.

CHAPTER VIII.

SLANAMULLAGH HOTEL, *June 29th.*

“MY DEAR ALICE: I generally turn to you when I am at my wit’s end, and I am now. Will you come to the rescue? The position is this: Vivien is quite out of the power of man to manage; possibly a woman might be more successful. Will you come over here and have a try?

“I know it’s awfully selfish of me to ask you, but I always was a selfish fellow. Then I suppose Milly must come for her holidays in a week or two, and if she follows in Vivien’s train there will be a pretty kettle of fish. Vivien has managed to offend Judith so direly that all chance of sending her to them is over. It’s a solemn thing to have a daughter.

“There are odd times when I feel inclined to let the whole thing slide and to hang myself, or something equivalent.

“Do turn your charity in my direction. It’s on the cards you might make something of me yet.

“Seriously, very seriously, if you possibly *can* come over and set us to rights, *do*.

“Are you working as hard as ever? We are simply existing in this back-of-the-world place. You might

find it pleasant enough for a change. Do you mind twenty-four miles on the top of a coach to begin with?

“Ever sincerely yours,

“J. H. B. MEREDYTH.”

Alison got Meredyth's letter at breakfast time, and thought over it all morning at intervals between making up accounts.

It was very characteristic in its appeal, which he was careful not to make too personal, while at the same time he obviously never lost sight of himself and his own position.

When things went wrong he turned to Alison instinctively, just as instinctively as he had forgotten her during the years when all was well with him.

He needed her now—he needed her, and so did Vivien, though she did not know it. The child had been spoilt among them—perhaps irredeemably spoilt. She had had a ruinous bringing up.

Alison thought over the letter, finding any idea of refusal impossible, and yet realizing that she could not agree without paying for it.

People would talk; she knew exactly what they would say and how they would say it.

But she had no hesitation in making up her mind.

What did any gossip really matter to her in her independent life?

There were two other drawbacks. One was the real inconvenience it would cause her to leave London just

then. The other was a memory of Meredyth's changed manner.

Alison deliberately decided not to give herself up to considering future possible difficulties. It was a mistake to look too far ahead. Meredyth was so impressible; he might have changed his whole view of life and of her in his different surroundings.

So many difficulties, even difficulties that looked insurmountable in the future, settled themselves with a little patience.

Abram Sassoon, who kept no conventional calling hours, broke in upon her decision.

He was a favourite of hers, and just now his coming was particularly a convenience.

He came into the room flourishing a paper, and, as usual, beginning to speak before he had crossed the threshold.

"I know I am an awful nuisance coming so early, but, Miss Carnegie, just look at this. Did you ever see such a brute of a review?"

"You have just come at the right moment as far as I am concerned. Is it your novel?"

Sassoon's eager face was half vexed, half amused.

"Just listen," he said, flourishing his paper. "'Mr. Sassoon has overwhelmed us with good things. He offers us two or three plots, a generous allowance of characters, and every Jewish anecdote and characteristic he has happened to know of. He has collected excellent materials for two or three three-volume novels. Perhaps some day, when he is a little older,

he may undertake the task of reducing order out of chaos.' ”

Sassoon paused, then he looked at Alison, and they both laughed.

He really minded very little, taking life with an easy optimism, and having a comfortable self-confidence. He knew Alison in the main agreed with the review, and he said so with a laugh.

“ But never mind the old book; better luck next time. Did you want me, Miss Carnegie? ”

“ Well, I did. Sit down, and stop flourishing that paper; you have narrowly escaped knocking over that vase several times. When do you want to take your fathers and mothers to the country? ”

“ Oh, not before August. It's the best time for them to get away, and the duke won't be at Luxmore, so I am sure we can get leave if we decide to take them there.”

“ Because I am thinking of going to Ireland for a week or two.”

“ To Ireland! ”

Sassoon repeated her words blankly, with a face of quick disappointment.

“ You look as astounded as if I had said I was going to the West Indies,” said Alison, careful that her tone should be stolidly matter of fact. “ I am going over to Slanamullagh. Vivien Meredyth is there, you know, and I want to see her, and perhaps bring her back here or to Scotland with me.”

Sassoon said nothing for a moment. He sat medi-

tatively tying up the fringe of a small table near him into knots in a way which pained Alison's tidy soul.

"Well," he said, "I *did* promise Miss Meredyth I would go over there for a holiday some time."

He reddened as he spoke, and Alison had an idea. Sassoon reddened easily, but still, combining this with his words, it might mean something. Sassoon had seen a good deal of Vivien in the winter; what more natural and what more desirable than the possibility that he might be growing to care for her?

Full of this idea, Alison bore the sight of her table fringe growing into a more and more inextricable entanglement.

"That is a good idea," she said easily. "Why not come over with me? I am sure you need a holiday."

"Might I? I say, that would be ripping!" said Sassoon, suddenly beaming. "I could get away now, I am sure. But do you really mean it? Shouldn't I be a bother?"

"On the contrary, my dear boy, you will be exceedingly useful, and it will be delightful for me to have you. It will do you all the good in the world to try amusing *yourself* for a change."

"It will be splendid," said Sassoon, "and there are two fellows in that big city shop I was telling you about—I wonder could I get leave for them?"

"I beg you won't do anything of the kind," said Alison, laughing a little. "This is to be a holiday, Mr. Sassoon, and really, even for the sake of your work, it

will be better to take a complete one. So don't attempt to turn us into an East End excursion party."

Sassoon laughed; he even seemed pleased to agree. And in a moment he was eager to know what day Miss Carnegie would start—how soon?

He was hotly impatient to be off.

Alison, while she saw nothing in his manner absolutely to confirm her suspicion about Vivien, certainly saw nothing against it.

Surely this would be the best thing for the girl. Sassoon, though he was very young and boyish, was steady and reliable, and in Vivien's case marriage seemed particularly desirable.

CHAPTER IX.

“VIVA,” said Jossy, dancing into his sister’s room in great excitement, “who do you think is coming on the coach with father to-day? I give you twenty thousand guesses and you will never guess.”

“I wish you would occasionally remember to knock at the door,” said Vivien.

She was feeling much happier than usual this afternoon. The sun was shining, and she was putting on her hat preparatory to a first bicycle lesson. There was to be an expedition by boat to some caves next day, and Viva loved being on the sea. Above all, for several days she had not had one of the despairing, complaining epistles from her mother, which always upset her.

Her rebuke was so mild that Jossy felt encouraged rather than otherwise.

“But, Viva, do try to guess. Father said I was to tell you, and I said I would give you three guesses first.”

“What a baby you are, Jossy! If father said you were to tell me, you had better do it at once, for I am going out. Don’t fidget with the things on my dressing table.”

Jossy having just contrived to knock over a bottle

of *eau de Cologne*, hastily proceeded to distract Viva's attention with his news.

"Father said I was to tell you that you were to have tea ready for Alison when the coach came back."

"Alison!"

Vivien, on her way to the door, stopped short, turning on Jossy a face white with dismay.

"Is Alison coming?" she said.

"Yes," said Jossy, "and I know that *I'm* very glad."

"You don't understand," said Viva. "O Jossy! you don't understand! I can't bear it! No wonder he was ashamed to tell me himself."

The pleasure had gone out of the day. Vivien's blackest mood was upon her, bringing with it crowding suspicions of her father and Alison.

"How can she dare to come?" she said under her breath.

"And, Viva, father said you were to have tea ready——"

"Tell father I got his message after I had made other arrangements. I shan't be in till dinner time."

Viva walked out of the room, her head held high, her mind full of passionate indignation.

Her father indeed thought little of her when he considered it enough to send her a careless message by her little brother. Or he was ashamed to face her.

Vivien was firmly determined that in so far as lay in her power Alison's visit should not be a pleasant one.

Jossy, rejoiced at his escape from discovery, picked

up the remnants of the *eau-de-Cologne* bottle and arranged them neatly on the dressing table.

He puzzled a good deal over what his sister had said, in the end deciding that Viva's moods were past comprehension.

He, at least, was glad that Alison was coming, and he spent the afternoon getting his aquarium and collections into good order for her.

But Viva started off for a long expedition over the sand hills, determined to mark her avoidance.

So it was Jossy, and only Jossy, who rushed eagerly to greet Alison as the coach drove up to the door, scarcely leaving her time to get down before he tumbled into her arms.

But she, even while she greeted him, gave a quick glance round.

"Where is Vivien?" said Meredyth sharply.

"She has gone out over the sand hills," said Jossy.

"Did you tell her Alison was coming?"

"Yes, father. And I think perhaps she was offended at its being a message given by me. But I have got tea ready," said Jossy.

"You see," said Meredyth bitterly, "what a sweetly mannered, obedient daughter I have."

Alison looked disappointed in spite of herself—so disappointed that he hastily changed his tone.

"But never mind. Alice, are you very tired, or shall we have tea before you go in?"

"I feel rather hot and travel-stained, but neverthe-

less, if you are not ashamed of my dirt and dust, I think tea would be good," said Alison.

Meredyth turned to Jossy and told him to have it brought out on the veranda. He found Alison a long easy-chair, sending Jossy for a cushion and then for a stool, and exerting himself to make her comfortable.

Sassoon, who had fraternized with two ancient ladies on the coach, and waited to see them and their baggage into the hotel, came over to the others, professing an eager desire for tea, but accepting Meredyth's suggestion of a whisky and soda gratefully.

Alison and Meredyth found his presence just then rather a relief.

It forced the conversation into easy, commonplace channels, and Sassoon never lacked something to say.

Alison leaned back in her chair and did not talk much. She was tired; the drive had been very long, and very hot in the unsheltered exposure of the coach.

Meredyth watched her furtively. Seen among the sand hills in Ireland, she seemed much more desirable than she had ever done in London.

Most of the conversation fell to Sassoon, with Jossy's assistance.

But presently, almost before tea was over, Jossy appealed to Alison, urging her, with a spoilt child's insistence, to come and see his collections.

"But, Jossy, dear, I am tired. Let me rest first, and see them later on."

"But they are all just ready," said Jossy, pouting,

“and the crabs are running about like anything. Do, please, come.”

He stood dragging at her hand, and Alison, nervously anxious to keep Jossy's alliance, would have yielded.

But Meredyth said: “Don't talk nonsense. Run away now, and don't bother us. Alison is tired, and I am not going to have you make a slave of her.”

“But, father——”

“Look here, Jossy, take me,” said Sassoon. “I adore crabs; I used to catch them.”

“Oh, did you?” said Jossy, eager at once. “Then tell me what they ought to eat. Is it sea-weed or little fishes?”

They went off together happily, and in their absence a short silence fell between the other two. Alison felt Meredyth was looking at her, and, in spite of herself, found it an effort to be absolutely natural.

Meredyth spoke first.

“Alice,” he said, “I have missed you awfully. It was nothing short of angelic of you to come.”

Alison under his look felt, with a sudden misgiving, that she might indeed have done better to stay away. She struggled with a sense of having put herself into a false position in coming.

“But I wish,” she said, “you had told Viva I was coming yourself, and a little sooner.”

It was so characteristic, so like him, to have sent Vivien a message by Jossy at the last moment to save himself from anything disagreeable.

"I wish I had," said Meredyth, "but I don't know that it would have done any good. You know, Alice, I suppose, why Viva behaves like this?"

He leaned forward, his elbow on his knee, and looked at her earnestly.

"You know, I suppose, that it is jealousy?" he went on deliberately. "She thinks I care too much for you—and I am not at all sure that she isn't right," he ended with a sigh.

He had by no means intended to speak to Alison like this. It was the sudden meeting with her, making him realize how much pleasure it brought him, the long, hot drive by her side, the novel surroundings of their meeting.

"I did flatter myself, Henry," said Alison, "that there was at any rate *one* woman in the world you did not talk nonsense to. It is ridiculous for two middle-aged people like ourselves to sit here making pretty speeches to each other."

The word "ridiculous" generally succeeded with Meredyth. It succeeded now. He pulled himself together, half offended and half relieved.

"I don't see that *you* have made many pretty speeches," he said, rather sulkily. "You have never even said you were glad to see me, and all the drive we couldn't say a word except what every one could hear, and particularly that young Sassoon. What on earth did you bring him for?"

"He wanted to come," said Alison; "he wanted to come so very much that I am inclined to think—to hope—that Viva must be the attraction."

“Viva! Good heavens! Alice, the fellow’s a Jew—and *such* coats!”

Alison laughed.

“If he marries Viva, you can arrange that he changes his tailor in the settlements,” she said; “and, as for his being a Jew, I should be inclined to put a good Jew considerably before a bad Christian. He is a very conscientious, unselfish young fellow.”

“What a terrible character! Why don’t you add ‘worthy’ and ‘amiable’ at once and finish him off? However, if Viva attracts him—but I can’t imagine Viva’s attracting any one.”

“He told me he had promised to come over.”

“Poor deluded young man! If he marries Viva, I shall feel I could weep for him.”

“Henry, don’t be so hard upon Viva. She has never had a chance,” said Alison.

But she, too, felt that on Sassoon’s side the benefit might perhaps be doubtful.

“It’s not in our power to arrange it at any rate,” she said. “Henry, it’s a glorious afternoon. If I go and wash off my travel stains, will you take me down to the sea? I feel shut in here; I want to see it.”

“I will take you anywhere you want to go—always,” said Meredyth.

Finding it pleasant so to speak to her, he scarcely troubled to restrain himself, though he saw that it made her uncomfortable.

CHAPTER X.

VIVIEN got back to the hotel about an hour before dinner. She had played two rounds of golf, and played them exceedingly badly, with a distracted mind.

She had postponed her meeting with Alison, but she could not postpone thinking of her, and wondering what she and Meredyth were saying to each other, and what they had thought of her rudeness.

When she got back it was to find Sassoon just in front of the veranda, and he was a great surprise. He had already struck up acquaintance with a couple of idle caddies, and was deeply engaged in a conversation which their limited English made difficult.

They were wild little mountain boys, with shock heads and bare feet, and Sassoon had fraternized with them promptly.

He abandoned them at once for Viva, coming forward, setting her caddy to work on her clubs, and taking possession of her, much to the disgust of her escort of the moment.

Viva was undoubtedly delighted to see him.

"I thought you had forgotten us," she said.

"And *I* thought you had forgotten *us*," said Sassoon, "this afternoon. It was so unkind of you to go out."

"I didn't know you were coming," said Viva. "Oh, did you come with Alison Carnegie?"

Sassoon nodded.

"And you went out."

"Well, I've come in again now at any rate," said Viva colouring. "How is the East End getting on, Mr. Sassoon?"

"Do you remember O'Neil's pet convert—the man with the wooden leg who used to recite? He married a girl thirty years younger than himself last week, and he has given her two black eyes already. O'Neil is much distressed. And that charming old Mrs. Reilly we were all devoted to—she has just died, after being supported for ten years by charity, and has left £300 to her relations. And, O Miss Meredyth! I almost forgot—your friend, Miss Urquhart, is going to be married! How are the mighty fallen!"

"Miss Urquhart!" said Viva. "Mr. Sassoon, you can't mean it—you can't! After all she said about marriage——"

"And about men. Well, he's a very *little* man, and, I should imagine, thoroughly trained and domesticated. I told you it wouldn't be safe to ask her."

"I don't think *any one* is to be trusted," said Viva solemnly.

The news came to her as a shock. She had believed in Miss Urquhart, and admired her and listened humbly,

if not entirely with conviction, to the words that fell from her mouth. This sudden abandonment of all her theories was bewildering.

"Surely you don't disapprove of marriage, Miss Meredyth," said Sassoon. "You are not old enough, nor—please let me say—ugly enough. You see talking of Miss Urquhart still makes me rude."

Marriage was a favourite subject of Sassoon's, and gave him an opportunity of airing many theories.

They were in a heat of discussion when Alison and Meredyth, escorted by Jossy, came back from the sea, and certainly looked hopefully engrossed with one another.

Vivien, lying back in a long chair, was listening lazily, half interested and half amused; Sassoon had his back to the sand hills. He had tipped up his chair, and was leaning over it, talking eagerly and emphatically.

Meredyth and Alison caught a sentence as they came up.

"But I shall not allow my daughters to go to school; it's different for sons, but girls ought to be educated at home," said Sassoon, with much decision.

"I *say*, Alice! They don't appear to be wasting time," said Meredyth, giving her a look of amusement. "I scarcely expected to find arrangements had progressed so far."

Viva, in the middle of her answer, caught sight of the others, and wavered, losing what she was going to say. Sassoon, following the direction of her eyes,

wheeled round on his chair, and, seeing them, sprang to his feet.

"I have been hunting for you everywhere, Miss Carnegie," he said.

His unconsciousness, real or affected, saved the situation.

Vivien, very red and nervous, got up and let Alison kiss her in silence. Alison was prepared to confine herself to a touching of hands, but Viva, forced by habit and Sassoon's presence, gave her usual greeting.

"And what were you two talking about so eagerly?" said Alison, to cover a silence.

"We were discussing matrimony," said Sassoon.

"That is to say," said Viva, nervously anxious to seem at ease, "Mr. Sassoon was talking, while I occasionally seized an odd moment when he was out of breath."

"I'm sorry," said Sassoon; "I do get hot about girls' schools. I know what they are like."

"Might I ask *how* you know?" said Meredyth.

"Oh, I know well enough. I have cousins, and I know what boys' schools are. School ruins a girl. I am not going to be dogmatic——"

"That I am convinced of," said Meredyth.

Sassoon paused, looked at Meredyth, and suddenly laughed.

"On this subject at any rate," he ended. "I am only speaking about myself—about my own daughters."

"You are a prudent man," said Meredyth gravely.—
"Jossy, come here and tell me if you intend to send

your daughters to school, and if so, whether you have yet decided on a school?"

Jossy, from a commanding position astride the veranda railings, stared at his father, perplexed by the gravity of his tone.

"It is only grown-up people who have daughters," he said.

"I am afraid you have been so culpably negligent as not to reflect upon the matter," Meredyth said. "I beg you will give it your best consideration at once."

Sassoon had grown rather red, and looked annoyed. Alison saw it, and spoke to him about the golf course, restoring his temper in an instant.

Meredyth, when they parted in the hall a few minutes later to dress for dinner, said to Alison in a low voice that he quite realized it was imprudent on his part not to be more tender with his future son-in-law's fads.

"It is rather a shame to laugh at him," said Alison; "he is so much in earnest, and there is a good deal to be said on his side."

"He is a most excellent young prig," Meredyth said; "but never mind. I shall be civil enough to him if the day ever comes when he asks me for Viva. My only struggle will be to prevent my joy seeming too overpowering, which wouldn't be prudent."

Alison made no answer. Meredyth understood her silence thoroughly.

He looked at her and laughed.

"There's a lot of opening for reform about me, isn't there?" he said.

CHAPTER XI.

SASSOON in a week had made friends with everybody in or about the hotel. He went about "scraping up acquaintance," as he called it, with everybody.

Meredyth had lived among the surrounding people almost as if they did not exist, and was astonished at the way Sassoon brought out the humanity in each one. Sassoon was perfectly happy eagerly discussing any subject that happened to turn up with a knitting circle of old ladies, and equally happy in the middle of a dozen caddies.

He sent for enormous bundles of sweets for the caddies, visited them in their cottages, made them promise to go to school in the winter, and tormented Meredyth to write to his brother about a uniform for them. He also took the golf fever very badly, and generally enjoyed himself thoroughly.

But Alison could not feel sure that he was in any wise devoted to Viva, though he evidently liked her.

As Meredyth said, he often looked engrossed with her, but then he looked just as engrossed with old Mrs. Montgomery, who was a grandmother and wore coloured spectacles.

"But then," Alison said, "he can't want to marry Mrs. Montgomery."

"He has too many interests to want to marry anybody. I believe he likes you a lot better than Viva. He is always in your pocket."

"Well, he can't want to marry me!" said Alison, laughing.

But she felt there was truth in what Meredyth said.

Her own position at the hotel was not a pleasant one. Vivien kept her manner of stern aloofness, sometimes amounting to rudeness, and only modified it a little in Sassoon's presence.

She took every precaution never to find herself alone with Alison. Once Alison had followed her on some excuse to her room, but found her reception obstinately chilling.

It did not seem to her that her presence was of any use to Viva, and Sassoon's only in so far that he had in a great measure displaced her stray friends.

But though she did not know it, the knowledge that Alison was there had a restraining effect on Viva, making her more careful in what she said and did.

Milly came over for her holidays, and proved friendly. She was not a pleasant or an interesting girl, being lazy and sullen, and disinclined to associate with any one except the servants, whose conversation and gossip had an attraction for her.

But she liked being with Alison as long as she was not urged to any exertion.

She and Vivien did not get on at all.

Alison saw that Vivien was restless and unhappy. The girl did not know what was wrong with her. She craved to be kept up to the level of excitement she had made for herself in London, and found both the books and the people who brought it were harder to get.

Once Alison, feeling rather ashamed of herself for it, tried to sound Sassoon as to his sentiments.

It was a muggy, damp sort of day, and she had contented herself with a chair on the veranda and a book, though the veranda was not a favourite haunt of hers.

She felt shut in and oppressed by the hills, and liked better to climb to a sheltered corner near the top, where she could see the sea.

Sassoon had been playing billiards. He came out and threw himself on the ground at her feet, with a lazy rejoicing at finding her alone.

"Where is Viva?" said Alison.

"I don't know. Some fellow came along when we were in the hall and took her off to tennis or something. And since then," said Sassoon, "my old Mrs. Montgomery has been trying to convert me."

"To convert you?"

"Yes. She first began to reproach me for not going to church, and then she nearly had a fit when I told her I wasn't a Christian. Then she began asking me if I had read the New Testament, and I said I had, and in the end I promised to go to church with her next Sunday and read a chapter of St. John every night for a week."

"Did you promise?"

"Yes—why not? If it pleases her, it's very little bother. It would have been rather a joke if I'd asked her to come to the synagogue with me in return. I'm sure she wouldn't have done it."

"She is not likely to make a convert of you, is she?" said Alison.

"Certainly not," said Sassoon. "I have never seen any reason to wish for a more satisfying or noble religion than Judaism. I don't think, in the main, there is one. But," he hesitated, "one has, to a certain extent, to suffer for one's belief. In some ranks it interferes in material ways, from Saturdays down. With a fellow like me—well, you couldn't guess how often the fact of being a Jew trips one up, and makes people look askance at you."

"Is that really the case now?" said Alison. Sassoon had never talked, never, she thought, felt like this before. Was it due to Viva?

"Indeed it is. Plenty of Christians down in my district consider it an enormous effort and condescension to let me help them or to come to my meetings and clubs. And educated, refined people don't like the idea of closer relations with a Jew. I don't wonder, from your point of view. But I do feel it, Miss Carnegie," said Sassoon, still with an odd hesitation in his voice. "For instance, if I wanted to marry a Christian lady——"

"But," said Alison, "you are quite determined only to marry a Jewess, aren't you?"

"I—don't know," said Sassoon, very slowly.

Alison, looking at him, saw a slow red rising into his face, and discerned a certain very new nervousness in his manner.

She felt rather uncertain what to say. It was absolutely certain that to many—perhaps to most people—his Judaism would stand in the way.

“I see,” said Sassoon, “you agree with me. Of course, I know lots of girls would marry me because I am well off—if I was a thug or a Fantee Indian. But that’s not the sort I mean.”

“I dare say with some people your religion would stand in the way,” said Alison thoughtfully. “I think myself that a man’s character is of infinitely more importance than his particular creed. If you should care about a Christian girl, Mr. Sassoon, take your chance and give her hers, and don’t waste time imagining prejudices for her.”

“You really think so?” Sassoon said, brightening. “Mind you, I want to be honest—a Jew I am and a Jew I shall remain.”

“I really think so,” said Alison, touched with the sudden expression in Sassoon’s handsome dark eyes.

CHAPTER XII.

VIVIEN and Sassoon sat on the top of a rock and quarrelled.

A personally conducted expedition to a Roman fort had been forced upon Meredyth, and, as Alison had joined the party, Vivien had promptly done the same.

A large contingent from the hotel had driven over on the coach and wandered about under the guidance of a bare-legged old woman, who did not appear very well posted for her position as guide, which she probably owed to her English. She "jaloused" that a man they called Ceyser had somewhat to say to it all, she didn't rightly mind what, and she acknowledged she was doubtful whether some successive mounds owed their existence to Druids or sappers and miners—she was sure she had heard tell it was one or the other.

The tourists had inspected the fort and made every sort of remark thereon, from learned to imbecile. A couple of men had entered into hot argument over dates and indications, and an engaged couple had been lost from the very beginning.

One recalcitrant maiden, forced by her parents to come and improve her mind while she desired to remain at the hotel and play tennis and sit in corners with

chosen friends, diversified the proceedings by insisting on keeping her eyes shut, and avoiding all possibility of gaining information with a resolution worthy of a better cause.

Several old ladies grumbled at Meredyth's want of information, obviously considering it part of his business to know all about Roman forts. Sassoon soothed and instructed them, inventing freely.

Vivien, content while her father was occupied in arranging for afternoon tea and the transport of an old lady who was determined to see the fort and incapable of walking there, had joined Sassoon and Alison, and when tea was over had submitted to being sent with him to climb for a view.

But she took care not to let the tea party out of sight.

When she saw Meredyth, with a few last directions, saunter off with Alison, she became restless.

She proposed to Sassoon that they should get down and join the others, and then took exception at the alacrity with which he appeared to accept the idea.

"Considering that you have jumped upon me at every second word, that's not so very wonderful," said Sassoon calmly; "but until you suggested going I was very happy and comfortable, and just about to ask if you would mind a pipe. Now that I'm up——"

"Now that you have gone to so much exertion, certainly we must go," said Viva.

They scrambled down the rock, but for some time Viva's search proved unsuccessful.

Alison and Meredyth seemed to have disappeared.

Once she remarked to Sassoon on their absence with elaborate carelessness, but she did not like to say any more or to acknowledge that she was looking for them.

It fidgeted her when Sassoon stopped to talk to some girls, to help stray old ladies over the rocks, to fraternize with a group of ragged children. She called him on impatiently.

Finally, Meredyth and Alison were discovered in a large cave, sitting on the rocks and talking with suspicious earnestness.

Their two figures stood out dark against the mouth of the cave, with a sharply defined curve of sea and sky behind them.

The white waves rushing in pressed a little and a little farther on with the rising tide. The shiny, green sea-weed on the rocks marked the limit of their power, and puddles here and there, which the last tide had left behind. The waves as they came dashed themselves first against one side of the cave, smooth with their centuries of effort, and then against the other, afterward breaking into spray on the damp roof and falling back on the rocks.

The sound of the sea was so loud that Meredyth and Alison did not hear the other two till they were quite close, and Viva was sure she read guilt in their start.

“Viva, is that you?” said Alison. “Come here, and see how oddly these rocks are coated over with tiny shells. And there is the queerest little beast in this

puddle beside me. Who knows anything about shellfish?"

"Surely," Meredyth said, "there is no subject on which Sassoon can not inform us?"

Alison interposed hastily.

"And in a cave just a little farther on there is a capital echo. Viva, you and Mr. Sassoon ought to go on and hear it."

Vivien looked at Alison indignantly. How dared she so openly and shamelessly show her desire to get rid of them?

"I don't care to go. I am sick of echoes," she said.

"At what period of your life have you met with such a superfluity?" said Meredyth. "You had much better go and listen to one more."

Vivien seated herself resolutely on a rock, and professed an entire want of interest in echoes, and Meredyth looked at Alison and laughed.

Sassoon, on the contrary, declared himself too thoroughly a cockney to afford to miss a chance of extending his experiences.

"Please come with me, Miss Carnegie," he urged; "it won't take us long, and you are not so superior as Miss Meredyth. Do come, please."

Alison was not very willing. She had wanted Viva and Sassoon to go together, and she was in the middle of a rather serious conversation with Meredyth.

But Sassoon had a spoilt child fashion of insisting on his own way, and she yielded.

The other cave was wider and longer, and there was quite a little gravel strand between the rocks and the sea. Sassoon planted himself on a rock in a very comfortable and settled position.

"Miss Carnegie," he said, "do sit down, just for a few minutes. I want to talk to you badly, and I am afraid to speak above my breath for fear I should hear my inanest remark echoed all over the place."

"It must really be only for a minute. The others are waiting for us."

"Let them wait," said Sassoon calmly. "I beg your pardon, Miss Carnegie, I meant to say, please let them wait. There's a lovely rock for you to sit on, with another for a back. Are you absolutely comfortable? Miss Meredyth has been amusing herself for the last half hour saying all the nastiest things she could think of to me."

"I suppose you have been quarrelling."

"*She* has been quarrelling. She told me, for one thing, Miss Carnegie," Sassoon's tone was half mocking, and veiled, Alison fancied, some annoyance—"she told me my name was ridiculous. I dare say it is in these days."

Sassoon was playing with gravel pebbles he picked from the strand, flinging them against the sides of the cave and into the waves. He did not look up.

"Viva is a silly little girl. I am sure she was only in fun."

"But I am inclined to think she is right."

Sassoon looked at Alison suddenly and anxiously,

though he went on in a resolutely light tone and with a laugh.

“For instance, there’s this. A fellow can say to a lady he likes, ‘Call me George,’ or ‘Henry,’ but if he says, ‘Call me Abram,’ it makes a farce of the whole thing.”

Alison laughed in spite of herself. Sassoon looked so boyish, and so vexed and mortified in spite of his affected carelessness.

“Don’t be too thin-skinned,” she said. “If a girl cared for you, it wouldn’t make any difference if your name was Melchisedec. As far as I am concerned, I don’t think Abram is a pretty name, but now it is so connected in my mind with you that I have grown to like it.”

Sassoon turned on her a suddenly radiant face.

“Have you really? Miss Carnegie, would you be so very, so *awfully* kind as to call me by my name if you don’t think it too hideous?”

“Of course I will. I shall like it.”

“Thank you so much. And—you don’t think me too awful an ass to have minded such a trifle?”

Alison smiled to him.

“I’ve been thinking lately that I am a conceited fool. I talk too much, and I think too much of myself and my plans and my stupid book, and make an ass of myself generally.”

“This is quite a new departure.”

“Yes, for I’ve been too crossly conceited to see myself. But there’s Mr. Meredyth always rotting me,

and he *does* make me feel a fool sometimes, Miss Carnegie."

Alison listened in surprise. A little self-depreciation would do Abram Sassoon no harm, but she could not bear the depression in the boy's voice.

"You see it's well enough for him. He takes life easy, and doesn't care much about anything. But I get so hot. Things don't excite him or hurt him."

"Never mind Mr. Meredyth. Don't worry over yourself, my dear boy. It's much better not to be too introspective. Come, we must go back."

Sassoon jumped to his feet.

"Hang it all! I'm incorrigible!" he said. "I've been prosing away as usual. You should have stopped me."

"Don't let yourself feel things disproportionately," said Alison.

"I don't know what I shall do when I get a big trouble," said Sassoon, looking gravely straight ahead of him. "Miss Carnegie," he turned to her suddenly, "please remember I am not like Mr. Meredyth. I have a great—an enormous—capacity for pain."

"And please remember," said Alison sharply, "not to judge other people you know nothing about."

Sassoon was penitent at once—so penitent that Alison, who was fond of him, relented at once, and they returned to the others very amicably.

Certainly an awakening was coming to Sassoon. He was egotistic even in the way he realized his egotism,

and vain in regretting his vanity, but it meant much that he recognised them.

His words about Meredyth, with their stratum of truth, had vexed her, and finally drove out her thoughts of Sassoon.

Had Meredyth really no deep feeling, or rather did he refuse to let himself feel deeply?

She wondered as she walked back by his side to the coach and drove home, still beside him.

Sassoon, in sudden rollicking spirits, had taken possession of Viva, and was making her laugh herself back to good temper.

In the constant noise and chatter kept up by them and the rest of the party Meredyth's silence and Alison's passed unnoticed.

Meredyth was in one of his most hopeful moods. A suggestion from Alison in the cave of approaching departure had at first greatly depressed him. Her coming had so completely changed and brightened his whole life; he had appreciated and admired her with the exceedingly mixed background of the hotel a thousand times more than ever before. And he wanted her.

But as he and Viva sat almost in silence in the cave, a resolution had grown slowly up in his mind. Alison was a woman old enough and quite awake enough to understand his position fully. He convinced himself that in asking her to marry him he would be doing her no wrong.

She could choose.

He convinced himself step by step that it was indeed

due to her to give her the choice. He was inwardly and characteristically sure that she cared for him, and perhaps expected him to speak.

She must find her life lonely, and, as for his position as a divorced man, lots of men similarly placed—lots of men even on whose side was the wrong—had married good women and been very happy.

Vivien would marry Sassoon, and the other children adored Alison; it would be the making of them to have her.

Then, though he had at present no money, only one life stood between him and both rank and money. Were an accident to happen to his brother, he would be a most excellent match for Alison.

And so many things might happen. Of course, he didn't *want* Jack to come to grief, but one must be prepared for all things.

Last winter Lord Meredyth had been thrown from his horse in the hunting field and been unconscious for hours. The doctor had said that if his head had touched the stone a hair's breadth more to the right he could have done nothing.

A hair's breadth more to the right and Henry would have been Earl of Meredyth, with plenty of money. And Jack hunted three or four times a week.

By the end of the drive Meredyth had convinced himself that his succession to Merevale was almost a certainty, and that it was his duty to ask Alison Carnegie to marry him.

The idea brought a certain change into his manner,

which he was scarcely conscious of himself, but which Viva jealously noted.

She noted, too, how, when he thought himself unobserved, he suddenly turned to Alison, touching her hand, and speaking to her in a whisper.

“But he shall *never* marry her!” she said to herself.

In her room she wrote a long, passionate letter to her mother.

CHAPTER XIII.

MEREDYTH, having made up his mind, was content to bide his time.

Alison noticed an indefinable difference in his manner to her all through the next day, and Viva noticed it too.

Alison alluded once or twice to Thursday as her day of departure, and he made no remark.

He was choosing his time elaborately in epicurean fashion.

In the evening it came.

The general public of the hotel were dancing, and it was a marvellous and wonderful scene. Every shade and variety of costume was there, and every shade and variety of dancing.

One stout old gentleman revolved carefully round, clad in tweed knickerbockers. Another was in evening dress, complete with the exception of a pair of carpet slippers. A couple bounced round, he with his arm tightly grasping his partner's waist and her hand firmly placed on his shoulder.

Some were very unmistakably hot, and nearly all were happy.

Alison had paused near the door to watch them.

Sassoon was dancing with Vivien, who was smiling into his face, and looking very bright and pretty. Alison hoped she was refraining from further home truths. When would she learn that men did not like to be snubbed, even by a pretty girl?

"Alice," said Meredyth, "come and dance with me."

Alison started and shook her head with a smile.

"You think I can't dance," said Meredyth, "but I believe I can, though I haven't tried for many a long day. Come, Alice."

"I think I am too old for dancing," said Alison.

"I only want you to dance once round."

"And I have refused Abram Sassoon dozens of times. My dear Henry, what has put such an idea into your head?"

"What on earth does that boy matter? You've a sort of pride in making yourself out old, but all the same you are going to dance with me."

Alison did dance with him.

Once, twice, they went round the room, and then he drew her out through a French window to a sofa under shelter of a balcony. It was a warm evening, and there was only the softest breeze, ruffling Alison's hair and touching her hot cheeks. The sand hills outlined themselves vaguely through the dusk, and when the music stopped they could hear the distant sound of the sea.

Alison, with an increasing sense of embarrassment, tried in vain to think of something to say.

"Alice," said Meredyth, "do you know why I wanted you so much to dance to-night? I don't believe I have danced since I last danced with you—do you remember when?"

"I know," said Alison with an effort, "that you grew much too lazy and magnificent to dance."

"But do you remember when we last danced together? I remember perfectly. It was the night before our engagement was broken off."

Alison still desperately struggled to ward off what she knew was coming.

"It is ridiculous," she said breathlessly, "for two sober, middle-aged people like ourselves to talk sentiment. Let us go in."

But the word failed of its effect.

Meredyth leaned forward, pulling his mustache and looking at her earnestly.

"It is no use trying to put me off," he said. "Alice, you must listen to me! You used to be very fond of me then—you used, indeed. Do you remember?"

"Harry, *don't!*" said Alison with a cry of sharp pain; "it is all so dead and past."

"But I *must* remind you, Alice," said Meredyth very softly, "because it is my only claim on you. If it wasn't for that, I should never dare, failure as I am, to speak to you. But I haven't forgotten, and, darling, I don't think you have forgotten."

"You forgot for twenty years, Henry!"

It was the only reproach Alison had ever made him, and it was wrung from her in the sharp pain of realizing

what her life might have been and all the sweetness she had missed out of it.

Meredyth slid his hand along the seat in the dusk and took hers, holding it closely and warmly.

"More shame for me," he said bitterly. "Alice, I know it hurts you, I know it can't be the same as it might have been, but let's take our second best and be thankful—and forgive me."

"It's impossible, Harry. You know it's impossible."

The next dance had begun. The *valse* floated out to them through the open window, and the sound of many moving feet. One or two couples who had followed them into the open air had gone in, and they were quite alone.

Meredyth spoke, after a moment's silence.

"Listen to me, Alice. I'm a poor man; at my age I have no right not to be in a better position. It looks as if all the advantages were on your side. But, my darling, I think you would be happier with me than with any one else—I do, indeed. I don't think you *could* marry any one else and begin freshly now. There's so much between us. Do you know that you have called me 'Harry' twice this evening? I wonder how many years it is since you did so last?"

"I shouldn't listen. Believe me, it is impossible now."

"Look here, dearest, let me have a chance. You may think it is too late, but indeed with you I shall make something of my life; I'll try so awfully hard.

Don't send me to hell for a prejudice," Meredyth ended hoarsely.

Alison had never seen him so much moved. She was trembling a little when she spoke.

"I wouldn't, Harry. Not if you and I were free to live our own lives. But you are not."

"I am not? Do you believe that Evelyn——"

"Without Evelyn, there are the children."

"And for their sake, if for nothing else.——"

"I don't believe it would be for their good, when their own mother is alive. Henry, I can't do it—I can't marry you."

"Darling, I can't do without you. I want you desperately, and I'll try hard to make you happy—God knows I will. I do believe you would be happier with me than alone. Let us start fresh, Alice; let us begin again."

"We *can't* begin again," said Alison.

Meredyth moved nearer to her, looking at her with passionate eyes. His own pleading had roused him.

"Give me a fair chance," he said; "don't answer now. Think, darling, think if you couldn't be happy with me. Don't answer; it's no wonder I fight hard for my salvation. Say you'll think, Alice; say you'll try to remember."

Alison felt herself shaken and uncertain. She did not know what to say to him nor how to say it.

"I will think," she said. "It can't alter anything—Henry, I am sure it can't—but I will think."

"God bless you, darling!" said Meredyth passion-

ately, and he stooped and kissed her hand once and again.

Alison shivered and rose to her feet.

As she turned, facing the window, she saw Viva standing, framed against the light behind. How long had she been there and how much had she seen and heard?

Meredyth, suddenly self-conscious again, turned on her with sharp anger.

“Vivien, what are you doing? It is time the lights were out.—Are you going to bed, Alice? I shall go round to the smoking-room.”

He vanished into the dusk, unwilling to face his daughter's sharp eyes, and Alison went into the room, half blinded by the light, with her head whirling.

When she reached her own room she sat down by an open window and tried to think.

The sound, and the soft, damp smell of the sea which came to her across the sand hills, helped her to calmness.

Of late years her life had run so steadily and quietly she had not thought it was in her to feel so agitated, so unstrung, and uncertain.

Alison was not given to pretences, even to herself, and she certainly could not pretend that Meredyth's words were unexpected.

She had feared them before she left London, and since her arrival she had been certainly sure what was coming. But she had not expected him to move her so entirely.

She could not marry Meredyth. He had claimed her

by their old love for each other, but there was more pain than pleasure in recalling that now.

She was no longer a young woman; her character was formed, and so was his. He could not take up his life and ambitions where he had left them, and she could not piece together her faith in him, and absorb herself in him.

She had her own interests; she had built up a life for herself slowly and painfully, and she was happy and useful.

If she married she felt she *must* give up her plans and interests.

No man would be content with such a divided life as she would otherwise give him; certainly not Meredyth. He would insist on the sacrifice, scarcely realizing that it was a sacrifice, and expecting Alison to be content, as she would once have been content, to be a wife. It *was* too late.

And Meredyth was a divorced man. Alison had strong feelings and ideas on the subject; she held, and always had held, strongly to the opinion that divorce freed neither man nor woman to marry again.

If she were to marry him, would she ever cease to feel that she stood in another woman's place, in some sense wronging her?

But yet she knew her marriage with him would help him. If she refused it was probable that some day another woman would fill the place; it might be one who would drag Meredyth down and be unkind to the children.

The children were a great temptation, they, and the possibility that some day children of her own might fill the lonely places in her life.

She would have something of her own; she would no longer help other people, remaining outside their lives. But it would cost her much.

If she had married Meredyth long ago, she would have been a happier woman. But could she do it now?

Alison could see no absolutely drawn line of right and wrong.

There seemed to her a selfishness in the way she clung to her own life and career.

She rose from her chair, and began to walk slowly up and down the room, trying to steady her mind by movement.

CHAPTER XIV.

NEXT morning a large Roman Catholic excursion party came by steamer to spend the day at Slanamullagh, and of course it rained.

The unfortunates arrived, green with seasickness, and soaked to the skin. Many of the girls had only white cotton dresses and no wrap of any kind. They were a miserable and draggled party. Alison was glad of some occupation, and found her time well filled in getting some of the party dried and comfortable.

Later on, when they had been fed, they were taken to a big barn, and an effort was made for dancing and games. It was difficult, as there was scarcely more than standing room for the party, and some of the more seasonably clad preferred to stroll through the pouring rain and thick sea mist.

The priests worked manfully, and Sassoon, in his element, proved very successful. He secured an old concertina, and played it and shouted songs to them, and he routed out some musical talent in the hotel.

Viva, with an anxious secret of her own on her mind, played the fiddle by his request, but then wandered away restlessly.

Sassoon was the success of the afternoon. He stayed in the barn till a certain element of cheerfulness had been restored, and a lightening of the rain was tempting the unfortunate excursionists to venture out.

Then Alison tore him away with difficulty for a belated afternoon tea.

As they passed into the hotel the coach drove up with Meredyth on the box, incased in waterproofs, from which the rain ran in streams and rivers.

He sprang down, greeting Alison with an air of proprietorship which made her shrink into herself.

She was glad of Sassoon as a protection; glad, too, that Meredyth was a great deal too wet to follow them into the house.

The veranda was drenched with in-driving rain, and much too cold and wet to sit on. They found a cosy corner of the writing-room to have tea in, and lighted a fire for themselves.

Alison was a little tired after her exertions. She leaned back in her chair, and her thoughts wandered off to Meredyth and her decision.

She suddenly remembered Sassoon, and roused herself with a start to find his dark eyes fixed on her face with a curious expression.

"Well, Abram," she said cheerfully, "you did wonders in cheering up those poor people."

"Miss Carnegie," said Sassoon, "may I ask you something? You won't be annoyed with me?"

"I am quite sure I shan't."

"But first I want to say—do you think—if people

care for each other—do you think that anything else matters? Do you think things like age or religion and so on really matter?”

Alison looked at Sassoon. He was apparently engrossed with his teacup, and looked decidedly nervous.

He was flushed and hot with the hot barn and his exertions; his hair, as it had a trick of doing, had worked itself into a fringe over his forehead, and the faintest dark line on his upper lip foretold a mustache. He looked so very young that Alison felt a misgiving. What would a household conducted by Sassoon and Viva be like?

“Your question is a very wide one, Abram. At the risk of being sentimental, if there is an honest love and respect in the question, I don’t think anything matters much.”

“Miss Meredyth,” said Sassoon, “laughs at me and calls me a boy.”

Alison fought with inward amusement.

“I think you have acted the part of a man for several years,” she said.

Sassoon put down his cup and looked at her.

“You don’t consider me too young to—to—care for any one?” he said.

Alison wondered what was coming, and how much confidence she was to receive.

“No, I don’t think so,” she said; “you have been put in a responsible position very much younger than most men, and you have held it in a manly way.”

“Well, then,” said Sassoon, “I want to ask you that

question. It's this: You have been kind enough to call me by my name; may I call you Alison?"

Alison stared at him in the extremity of astonishment. What he said was so utterly different from what she had expected.

For a moment she thought he must have taken leave of his senses; it was so unlike Abram Sassoon to be impertinent.

"My dear boy, what *do* you mean?" she said.

His face fell.

"I see," he said, "you think me impertinent."

"Well, I do, the smallest trifle. You see, I am a great deal older than you——"

"You said," Sassoon interrupted, "that that did not matter."

The merest surface misgiving crossed Alison's mind. So incredible a misgiving that it did not rest with her.

"That was in a very different case," she said. "Abram, I want to talk about Viva; you know she doesn't mean half she says."

"What does it matter *what* she means?" said Sassoon. He sprang to his feet and stood over Alison.

"I don't care one atom whether Miss Meredyth meant three times as much as she said, or nothing at all. I am only thinking of you, Miss Carnegie; you *must* know I am only thinking of you!"

Alison was startled now with a vengeance. She was absolutely thunderstruck.

She stared at Sassoon, astonishment, dismay, self-reproach chasing themselves through her mind.

What ridiculous crank had the boy got into his head? Was it in any wise her fault? But how could she have conceived the idea of such a thing? Even now she could scarcely believe that Sassoon seriously meant what he said.

"You said," Sassoon went on, "that age did not matter. What do a few years matter? I think there is nobody like you, Miss Carnegie—nobody. We have known each other for a long time—you said I was not too young—I shall be twenty-one in August."

The absurdity of it all began to conquer Alison. She felt her lips quivering, and suddenly turned aside her face to hide the suppression of a smile.

"I thought," said Sassoon, "that you understood—surely you understood? I can't expect you to care—why should you? But I thought you understood what I meant."

His voice broke suddenly, and Alison felt all desire to laugh leave her.

The bitterness of disappointment was crushing down upon him. Just at first he had been almost confident; he had always been able to get what he wanted.

"Abram," Alison said, "I didn't understand—perhaps I ought—but I don't see how I could ever have imagined. I thought it was Viva."

"Viva! How could any one *look* at her when you were there!"

"But you must think how absurd this is. I am old enough to have been your mother. I remember seeing you when you were quite a little boy, and I was not

even a very young woman. Be sensible, my dear boy."

Abram stood up very straight, evidently doing his best to pull himself together and face his disappointment.

"All that is so very—infinitesimal, if you could care for me," he said. "Miss Carnegie, of course it's a trifle to you, but it's *everything* to me. I love you, and it wouldn't matter if you were a hundred years older than I am."

Alison felt rebuked, also perplexed and direly ashamed of herself.

At her age, having for years considered all question of love and marriage over for her, it was preposterous that within two days two men should so speak to her; it was ludicrous, it almost seemed to argue a lightness in her behaviour.

She would as soon have expected Jossy to fall in love with her as Sassoon, and had observed no precautions in her treatment of him. That, she had considered, had been one of the privileges of her age.

"Abram, I can't tell you how sorry I am. I am very, very fond of you, but——"

"I understand," said Sassoon in a rough voice. "I couldn't expect anything else. It's my infernal conceit; it's not your fault."

"And you will try and be sensible and not worry yourself, dear boy?"

Alison put her hand on his arm, but he shook it off.

"Don't!" he said, turning away. But in a moment he added, "I beg your pardon; you are very kind."

It was almost the first time Abram Sassoon had ever had anything denied him, and he felt it keenly. He was trying hard to bear it well.

"If—if you don't want me," he said, "I'll go out for a bit. I don't want to worry you or to make an ass of myself—and—I don't suppose my being older would have made any difference?"

"It wouldn't, indeed. Remember, I am a settled-down, middle-aged woman, a great deal too old to think of falling in love with any one. But I hope you are not going to desert me as a friend; there is no one I should miss so much."

"All right," Sassoon said, with his face turned away. He left the room without looking at Alison again. Absurd, out of the question as it was, she saw he felt it bitterly.

Left to herself, she laughed a little, with tears in her eyes.

She remembered Sassoon once when he was a little boy in a blue velvet suit. She had been selling at a bazaar, and Sassoon had been brought by his mother to present a bouquet to the Princess of Wales, who opened it. Sassoon had been a graceful little boy, and Alison had taken him on her knee and fed him with sweets.

Her life had been settled and her days of love-making over before he was in knickerbockers.

She had thought her days of trying to manage peo-

ple were over. She had tried to manage Viva and Sassoon, and this was the result. She only hoped and prayed that Viva did not care.

Sassoon was such a boy; he would soon forget, and Viva might console him.

He had realized himself how impossible it was.

She had been selfish, and too much engrossed with her own affairs and ideas.

Even as she sat there, with tears for Sassoon in her eyes, she felt her thoughts drawn back to Meredyth and her own life.

With Sassoon it was impossible that this fancy of his could be vital, though it hurt him sharply at the time; but with her and with Meredyth things had reached a very vital point indeed.

CHAPTER XV.

NEXT day there seemed to be a general strain.

The Meredyths, Sassoon, and Alison had a corner of one of the long tables to themselves at meals, and among them words lagged heavily.

Meredyth and Alison made a little disjointed conversation, but at lunch he was away as usual with the coach, and all the effort fell on her.

Sassoon was unhappy and awkward, and showed it boyishly. Vivien was nervously studying her father, and in his absence Alison, wondering if she might have been mistaken—if that letter to her mother would have been better unwritten, and would only lead to mischief.

They all separated with relief when lunch was over.

Alison spent the afternoon by herself. She did not feel that she could bear the talk and gossip of outsiders.

She went for a long walk over the sand hills, getting back a little before the coach, to find Vivien pacing restlessly about the veranda.

They exchanged some disjointed remarks, and Meredyth drove up in the middle with a contingent of new arrivals.

Vivien started forward, meeting her father with unusual eagerness.

When the new arrivals had been seen into the hotel, she startled Meredyth and Alison by saying nervously that she would walk a little way along the road—she was cold—she wanted exercise.

Meredyth looked after her in amazement.

“Bless her!” he said; “but isn’t it a trifle unexpected? Who has ventured to suggest to her that her chaperonage was occasionally somewhat oppressive?”

Alison, too, was surprised. She said nothing, but stood leaning over the veranda rail beside Meredyth, waiting for what she knew must come, still full of that uncertainty which was so unusual to her.

He turned to her, speaking tenderly, but confidently.

“When am I to have my answer, darling?”

“You should have had it long ago, Henry, but that I don’t know *what* to say to you,” said Alison.

“Then let me decide for you,” Meredyth said. He glanced round, and caught her hand.

“It will be yes, won’t it, Alice?”

“But we must both think—think thoroughly first. We are neither of us very young, our lives have been completely different, and our characters are formed. I doubt our being happy together.”

“But I don’t. I know,” Meredyth said with a laugh, “I shan’t be allowed to take life easily any longer; but never mind, darling, you shall ballyrag me as much as you like.”

He was so cheerful, so sure of himself and her, that

Alison felt her arguments and her power of resistance fading away.

"And there are my women and my work and writing," she began, feeling herself fighting for defeat.

"You shall give up nothing you don't want to give up, my dearest."

Alison knew better. She recognised with a sharp consternation Meredyth's use of a confident future tense.

Jossy's appearance was a relief.

He had an unfortunate frog, incased in a small cardboard box, to exhibit. It escaped several times and had to be recaptured, and Jossy put forward a project of ensconcing it in Milly's bed, with a view to listening for her screams when she felt its cold body.

Meredyth, annoyed by Jossy's appearance, sternly discountenanced this idea.

He would have sent the little boy away, but the arrival of a foursome of golfers, eager to recount their strokes and scores, made any hope of being alone out of the question.

"This evening!" he said softly to Alison, and went away to dress for dinner.

He was very happy. All was going well for him, and he saw before him the smoothing-out of his life.

He found himself whistling as he dressed, a thing he very rarely indulged in. His whistle was tuneless, and even with only himself as audience Meredyth did not care to do things he did not do well.

But this evening he whistled as he waxed his mus-

tache, as he brushed his hair carefully over the bald spot, as he tied his tie in an accurate bow.

He had absolutely no presentiment.

He was standing in front of the glass in his shirt sleeves, giving a last twist to his mustache, when there was a knock at his door.

He turned his head with "Come in!" on his lips, but before he had time to speak the door was opened hastily.

Meredyth started violently; he took a step back and turned very white.

"Evelyn!" he said. "My God!"

Evelyn rustled into the room unhesitatingly. She was smartly dressed, though her dress was dusty and crushed, and she looked worn and excited.

"Yes," she said, "I've come, Henry. And such a journey! Good heavens! I am perfectly worn out! Pity me, Henry, and be kind to me. I am very miserable. Dear me, how bald you are getting!"

Meredyth looked at her. She was very little changed, so little that it seemed almost as if the whole last year were wiped out.

He went hastily to the door and closed it, turning the key in the lock.

Then he turned to Evelyn with set face.

"What have you come here for?" he said.

She sank into a comfortable chair.

"I am completely worn out. And no wonder! The excitement and that awful journey! I've been shaken to pieces on a vehicle fit for no Christian country, and

for nights I have lain awake shedding tears, thanks to you!"

"I am obliged for your interest. But might I trouble you to say to *what* I owe this—pleasure?"

"You ask me that?" said Evelyn, and burst into tears, "when it is your conduct—in separating me from my darling children—in—in—behaving so disgracefully with Alison Carnegie. Oh, I wonder I have not gone mad with all I have suffered from you and—others!"

"You always *had* an original way of looking at things," said Meredyth bitterly. "Putting aside the question of where disgrace belongs, are you aware that you run the risk of compromising yourself seriously?"

"Compromising myself!" Evelyn stared.

"If you are found in the room of a man who—is *not*—your husband," said Meredyth deliberately.

Evelyn gave a cry of dismay.

"What do you mean, Henry?"

"Exactly what I say. You have no more right here than the veriest stranger. What will Major Arkwright-Gage say?"

Evelyn sobbed convulsively.

"Don't speak of him, the cruel wretch! Henry, if you only knew how he has treated me——"

"Spare me the recital, I beg of you."

"And now, when I have come all this long, this fearful way, to see you and my darling children, all you want is to get rid of me—to turn me out. I shall die if you do, and the best thing perhaps! I shall be out of

your way. And you and Alison—— Oh, yes, Viva has told me all—I know all!”

“I am glad of that,” said Meredyth calmly, “as in that case you know that you have no right whatever to interfere with my actions.”

“No right? No right to think of my darling Viva, my sweet little Jossy? Henry, I didn’t think even you could be so cruel. And if you knew what I have gone through!”

She sobbed bitterly.

Meredyth stood meditatively. What she said was true; legally they were nothing to each other, but there were always the children.

What should he do?

In a few cold questions he gathered from Evelyn’s sobbing replies that Viva had written to her, telling of Meredyth’s and Alison’s iniquitous proceedings, and the minute Evelyn had got the letter she had wired to Viva and started to come over. And Major Arkwright-Gage had spent all her money, and been cruel for a long time.

She had left him and intended to devote any small remnant of her life to good works. And Henry must remember that those God had joined together man could not put asunder.

Meredyth listened with half his mind.

“Look here, Evelyn,” he said, “you must see it is impossible for you to stay here. Let me get a room for you and send you something to eat, and afterward I will drive you myself to a small hotel not more than twelve miles away.”

"Drive me! Not twelve miles away! Henry, do you want to *murder* me?"

"My dear Evelyn, consider at least *my* reputation."

Meredyth very deliberately began to put on his coat and waistcoat.

His heart had sunk very low, and he did not know what to do, but he preserved his outward calm impassiveness, which, as his wife, had so often irritated Evelyn to madness. It did now.

She professed, amid sobs, a determination to see Alison at once. Had she to seek her through the hotel, she would see her.

She must be confronted with this woman who wanted to usurp her rights and her children.

"I regret to remind you that you have *no* rights."

"And no children, I dare say you will say next!"

Meredyth laughed uncheerfully.

"Inconsequent as ever, I see," he said. "Evelyn, there is no possible use in your seeing Alison. You are absolutely powerless."

"If you marry her, I will kill myself! Swear to me—swear to me, Henry, that you never will!"

"I shall do nothing of the kind," said Meredyth calmly. "There is nothing I desire so much as that Alison should be my wife."

It was impossible to move Evelyn from the one point to which she clung. She must be confronted with Alison. If Meredyth did not send for her, she would herself go in search of her.

At his wit's end, fearing hysterics, which seemed imminent, he proposed at last to take her to his sitting-room, where she should see her children. He reflected that most of the hotel guests would be downstairs ready for dinner. His sitting-room was only a few doors down the passage, and it would be something to get Evelyn out of his room.

Vivien was waiting about the passage. She came up to her mother, taking her at once under her protection, and facing her father defiantly.

She would go and find Alison, she said, and started on her quest, daring her father with her eyes to forbid her. But Meredyth was quite undecided what to do.

Only Milly was in the sitting-room. She was ready for dinner, in a white muslin frock with a sash, and she had seized a last few minutes for her painting. She was a secretive child, and it was her impulse to bundle it away when the door opened.

Evelyn, with a little cry, held out her arms.

"My child!" she said. "Milly, come to me!"

But Milly rose to her feet, crimson, agonized with embarrassment, and did not move. She knew her mother had done something wicked, something she resented from its effect upon them all, half understanding it; and Milly had never been a favourite or cared much for her mother.

She stood, awkward and embarrassed.

"Milly, darling, won't you come to me? Aren't you glad to see me?" Evelyn said, and, going to the girl, she tried to kiss her.

But Milly gave an averted cheek, and wriggled herself almost roughly.

Evelyn stood looking at her for a moment with a quivering face.

“God help me!” she said; “you have turned even my children against me!”

And she threw herself into a chair, bursting into a passion of heart-broken weeping.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE minutes passed very slowly. The dinner gong sounded through the house with a cheerful, commonplace sound which made Meredyth realize his discomfort keenly.

Evelyn sobbed on with an abandonment about which there had ceased to be the least trace of affectation, and Milly stood uncomfortably changing from one leg to the other, and looking sulkily miserable.

Her father, turning on her sharply, told her to go down to dinner.

Then he brought himself to say a few words to Evelyn, speaking more gently than he could have imagined possible.

When Alison came with Viva, there was another long, full silence.

Evelyn raised her white, tear-stained face and gazed at Alison, who looked white and shocked.

Vivien was the first to speak. She sprang to her mother's side, turning fiercely on her father.

"What have you done to her? How have you made her cry so dreadfully?"

"Pray hold your tongue, Viva!" said Meredyth.

"Alison," said Evelyn tragically, "I know everything!"

Alison interposed in an expressionless voice not her own.

"Hadn't Vivien better go? She might go to dinner; people will talk if we are all away. And, Evelyn, you can't want the child here."

"I will not go away," said Viva hotly. "I will not leave my mother without some one to protect her."

"My darling!" said Evelyn caressingly.

"It is impossible," said Meredyth, "that Viva can remain. Even *you* must see——"

"I don't see. Viva has always stood by me. It is thanks to her sharp eyes that I am here to prevent this treachery."

"Vivien, leave the room at once!" said Meredyth.

Vivien hesitated for half a second. Then she moved nearer her mother, clasping her hand more firmly. She was very miserable, very determined not to leave her mother, and unconsciously comforted a little by a sense of age and importance.

Meredyth looked at her and shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well, Viva. You shall have the pleasure of suffering yourself and of knowing that you make all this more painful for everybody concerned.—Alice, I am sorry you should be brought into a matter which ought essentially to be between Evelyn and myself."

Alison did not answer. She was struggling with an unreasonable sense of guilt. After a slight hesitation, she went over to Evelyn.

"Evelyn, you are worn out," she said. "If you consider you have anything against me, let it rest till to-morrow. Indeed, my dear, I am very sorry for you."

"Let it rest till to-morrow—*never!*" said Evelyn. "No, I don't trust you! How do I know what would have happened by to-morrow? There's nobody to be trusted. You, Alison, who stand up for women—you come behind another woman who is helpless and steal her husband and children——"

"Evelyn, stop talking in this wild way!" said Meredith. "You deserted your husband and your children, and you must suffer for it."

Evelyn clasped her hands, wringing them passionately together.

"And if I did, whose fault was it? I loved you—I *did* love you once, Henry, and I might have been a good woman. But you—oh, you were never what people call unkind—you only neglected me, sneered at me politely sometimes, never let me interfere with any plan or amusement, made me always feel that I was of no consequence to you. And now—— Oh, my God! I wish I never had been born!"

Evelyn ended faintly. She was absolutely overwrought and worn out.

Vivien, bending over her, comforted her with small caresses, and bestowed fierce glances on the other two, who seemed to have fallen into the position of accused.

Evelyn, regaining self-consciousness, began to murmur of "those joined together by God," "devoting the remnant of my life to helping others."

"There's no good to be got out of this," said Meredyth grimly. "I am going down to dinner. There is no good in setting more gossip than we can help afloat. —Alice, you had better come."

But Alison shook her head. She felt that dinner would have choked her.

"Alison," Evelyn said, "you are just like the rest. Henry, I can't expect to think of me—he never did. But you—if you were in my place, how would you feel if you saw another woman robbing you of your children——"

"Not of me, mamma," said Viva quickly.

"Sending me to ruin—to ruin. I have nothing left—nothing!"

When Evelyn forgot to be affected her whole manner changed. Meredyth and Alison winced before her words.

She turned to Meredyth suddenly.

"Give me another chance, Henry. For the children's sake—for the sake of all you value in this world or the next, give me another chance! Indeed, if you had been a little kinder, I should have been a better wife.—Viva, my darling!—Alison, as you are a woman, beg him not to be hard!—Henry, I should never worry you or expect anything—never! And I should make you so comfortable——"

"Evelyn, you don't know what you are talking about. It is absolutely impossible," said Meredyth, drawing his breath thickly.

In the following pause, which no one seemed able

to break, the door opened and little Jossy came into the room.

He was looking for his father, and held the cardboard box with his frog tightly clasped in his hand.

He stood in the doorway, a small, fragile figure, with his pale face and light hair.

"Papa, may I keep the frog here?" he said. Then he realized a strange presence, and stopped.

Evelyn from her chair held out her arms, turning very white.

"Jossy!" she said.

Jossy turned his head in her direction, hesitating, suddenly flushing.

They all watched him. Alison, after one glance at Evelyn, turned away. The anxiety in her face was terrible; it was not for another woman to look on.

Jossy advanced a step toward her, suddenly beginning to tremble.

"Jossy," said Viva, "it's mamma. Aren't you going to speak to her?"

The words seemed to break the spell on Jossy's lingering feet.

He suddenly darted forward, throwing himself into her arms.

"O mamma, mamma! you've come back! I've wanted you so dreadfully!" he cried.

The frog, cast down on the floor, cardboard box and all, made its escape and hopped under the table. Jossy was beyond thinking of it.

But when Meredyth and Alison were leaving the

room he awakened to his father's existence, turning round on his mother's knee and holding out one hand to his father, while with the other he tightly clasped his recovered mother's dress. His father had been very good to him for the last year, and he was a faithful little soul, and feared he might feel neglected.

"Papa," he said, "come and sit beside us. I am so *dreadfully* happy!"

Alison, turning away, went on down the passage alone.

CHAPTER XVII.

"ALICE," said Meredyth roughly, "you are not going to let this alter anything?"

It was several hours later. Meredyth and Alison stood together on the veranda in the dusk of a damp summer evening.

Meredyth faced her, fighting desperately against the look in her face.

"It must alter everything," said Alison in a low voice.

"You are going deliberately to throw me aside because a hysterical woman has been deserted by her lover—for that's what it comes to. It is Evelyn who is to blame. Why should it be for us to suffer?"

"I feel I am quite sure that there is no possible choice."

"Why should we both suffer for her selfish jealousy?"

Alison shook her head.

"I can't deliberately set myself to break another woman's heart, and to take a place which I feel—O Henry! I do feel it—I have no right to. When I saw little Jossy hold your hand and his mother's——"

"As a matter of fact, do you want me to take Evelyn back?" said Meredyth bitterly.

"No, I don't. No, Henry; for the children's sake, for yours, even for hers, I think that would be a hideous mistake. I only mean that you are not free—that nothing can make you free while the children are there."

"A nice position you place me in," Meredyth said. "Do you think that I—that any man—can stand it?"

Alison made no answer. Something in her manner, in the absence of the hesitation of the last few days, told him he had indeed lost her.

With the knowledge sprang up a mad craving for her.

His wooing had all along been too confident, scarcely whole-hearted; he had never realized until now how much the loss of her would mean.

He turned suddenly, and, putting out his arm, drew her to him almost roughly. It was in his heart to take her in his arms and kiss her passionately, but something in her quiet confidence in him held him back, for once in his life, from doing what he greatly desired.

He dropped his arm with a groan.

"My darling, for God's sake, think what you are doing! Have mercy upon us both!"

Alison paused. It was not that she doubted what to say, but that she wanted to say it in the way to give him least pain.

She saw in his face that he understood and felt the hopelessness of his pleading.

"Don't wreck our lives for a sentiment," he went on desperately. "Evelyn has no deep feelings. She will have forgotten, while I, at least, am most miserable. You have no right to do it, Alice."

"What would our lives together be after this? Henry, we are not a couple of children; we can bear pain. There's no reason why we should not be friends."

"Friends!" Meredyth repeated the word in a rough, contemptuous tone. "'Let us be conventional and we shall be happy'—that's every woman's creed. Damn such hypocrisy!"

Alison had nothing to say.

"And for my part——" he began, but Alison, looking beyond him, suddenly stopped him with a word of warning.

Following the direction of her eyes, he found Vivien had come out on the veranda. Dazzled by the light she had left, it was a moment or two before she saw them.

Meredyth turned on her with a muttered oath.

"You little mischievous fool! You may stop your prying now. You have done all the harm there is to be done."

"I am not sorry," said Viva, "for anything that I have done."

But it took all her pride to keep tears from her eyes, and she bit her lip to stop its trembling.

"I dare say not. You don't understand what you have done. Your infernal meddling has spoilt two lives, and been the ruin of your mother as well."

"Henry, don't," said Alison.—"Vivien, I am sure you meant all you have done for your mother's sake. But it is true that you did not understand."

"I understood well enough. I saw what you meant. If you send my mother away, I will go with her. I shall take care of her," said Viva, fighting against the queer lost feeling every meeting with this new, changed mother brought.

"Alison, it is you who have made all the misery, and now I suppose you will triumph. You will marry father—it doesn't matter to you what becomes of us."

"Vivien, listen to me," said Alison gravely. "You know I don't break my promises. I am willing"—she did not look at Meredyth—"to promise you that I will never marry your father."

Meredyth gave a half-suppressed exclamation.

"Is that true?" said Viva.

"I shall never marry your father," Alison repeated.

Without another word Vivien flew into the house, eager to bring comfort to her mother.

"Do you mean that?" said Meredyth hoarsely.

"Yes, I mean it."

He turned away in silence, and left her standing by herself.

So it was all decided, decided past all possible future doubt.

Alison was free to go back to her work, and she would be a lonely woman always.

She asked herself no questions about the right and wrong of what she had done. From the first moment of Evelyn's arrival she had felt that anything else was impossible.

But the memory of Jossy's clinging arms around his mother's neck made her heart ache.

CHAPTER XVIII.

NEXT day, by the awkwardness of fate and Irish train arrangements, they had all to leave by the coach together.

The people at the hotel had wondered and guessed there was something unusual in the air, and curiosity brought a good many of them into the neighbourhood of the veranda when it was time for the coach to start.

Vivien was going with her mother. She had announced her determination to do so in the morning firmly, not to say obstinately, and now she stood beside Evelyn, holding her wraps and watching over her jealously.

Jossy clung to his mother's arm. From the very first he had had an intuition that he would lose her again, and he had followed her about, careful not to let her out of his sight. He had showed her his collections, and abandoned interest in his frog for the sake of his "pretty, dear mamma."

But he had asked no questions. He had accepted the growing knowledge of her immediate departure with a child's resignation and sense of powerlessness.

But he held her arm tightly, with a strained, unchildlike look in his little face.

Alison, quiet and grave, sat apart with her two boxes, exchanging occasional unavoidable farewells with people in the hotel; and Sassoon, a little puzzled, hovered round her, anxious to be useful, but shy about offering.

Meredyth walked restlessly about. He was not going to drive the coach, feeling the position would have been too farcical, and he did not know whether to go away or to stay where he was.

When the coach drove up the strain of the last few minutes was almost unbearable.

As the first box was put in Jossy's courage suddenly broke down, and he clung to his mother, choking down his sobs and trying to control himself.

"Take me with you, mamma, please take me," he said.

"I can't, darling; not now."

"Please do, mamma. I'm not crying because I am naughty, really, but because I want you so *dreadfully*."

Evelyn gently tried to unfasten his clinging fingers.

"I wish I could take you, my pet," she said; "perhaps I shall some day. But you must stay with your father."

"But papa will come too.—Please come, papa," Jossy pleaded, with the persistence of desperation, and over his fair little head Evelyn shot a glance of triumph at Alison.

When the little boy's despairing sobs became uncontrollable, Meredyth told Milly sharply to take him away.

In the fuss of the last few minutes Meredyth and Alison had a few moments apart.

"Have I your authority to do what I can for Viva? Perhaps I shall be able to persuade her to come to me later if—if she finds her present intentions can't be carried out. I should love to have her."

"Life with Evelyn will be the ruin of her."

"Perhaps not. Evelyn has evidently quite broken with Major Arkwright-Gage, and Vivien may help to steady her. As for the girl herself, I think her great love for her mother will pull her through. And Evelyn says she means to devote herself to East End work——"

"Evelyn among the slums! Alison, you know well enough how much use she will be and how long it will last. I suppose *that* has come to nothing?"

He made a motion of his head in the direction of Sassoon, who was helping Viva to her seat.

"I don't know. Perhaps some day. If Viva comes to me, as I hope she may, she and Abram will be immensely thrown together. Poor little Jossy! Perhaps you will send him to me for Christmas and the pantomimes."

"You think of everybody," said Meredyth bitterly, "except me."

It was their parting. Evelyn had been watching

them jealously from the coach, and called impatiently to Alison. She touched Meredyth's hand, and he helped her up.

At the turn of the road she looked round, and saw him standing by himself on the veranda steps.

.
A week later, at a cricket match at Lord's, Lady Grace Bruce remarked to Mrs. Fraser-Latimer that Alison Carnegie was looking ill, and Mrs. Fraser-Latimer shook her head wisely, and suggested that she not improbably felt the failure of her last bold attempt to marry Pat Meredyth.

Lady Grace knew, of course, that Alison had always been in love with him, and report said Evelyn Meredyth had not been without reason for jealousy—people who set up for being good were always the worst.

But was it not too outrageous of her to have followed the unfortunate man to a small hotel in the wilds of Ireland? Luckily, Pat was very capable of taking care of himself, but it was said that he had had a narrow escape.

Had Lady Grace ever heard of anything so bare-faced and audacious?

And here Mrs. Fraser-Latimer had to pull herself up, greeting Alison Carnegie with an inquiry as to how she had enjoyed her visit to Ireland.

Mr. Fraser-Latimer had an idea that Pat Meredyth was somewhere about that island—had Miss Carnegie happened to meet him?

Among Meredyth's set in London this was the version of the story which became prevalent, spreading in some occult way from the hotel at Slanamullagh.

As time went on, it was the version which Meredyth himself grew to believe.

THE END.

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